Margaret Morganroth Gullette • Robert Newton

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THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 1996
VOL. 281, NO. 1

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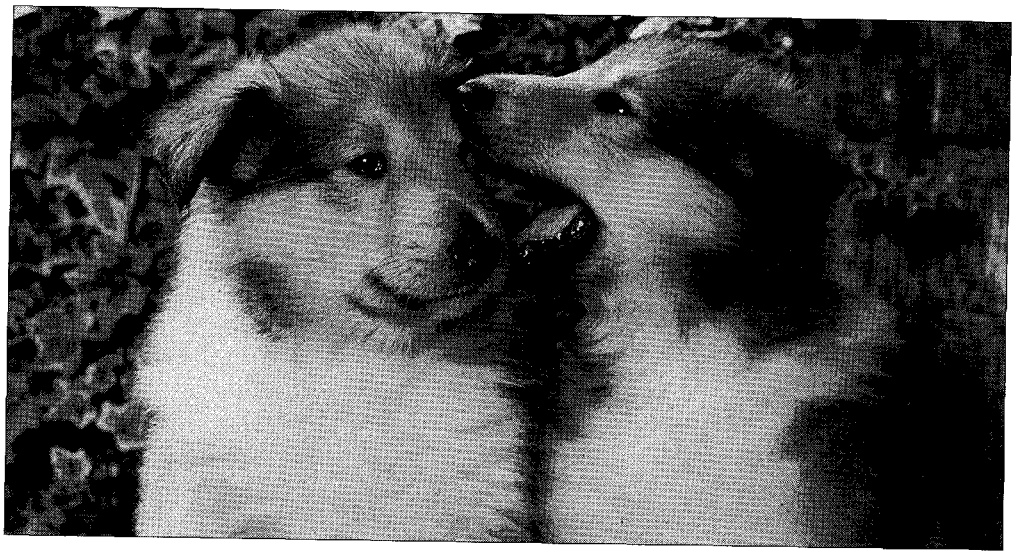
You wouldn't wear these.



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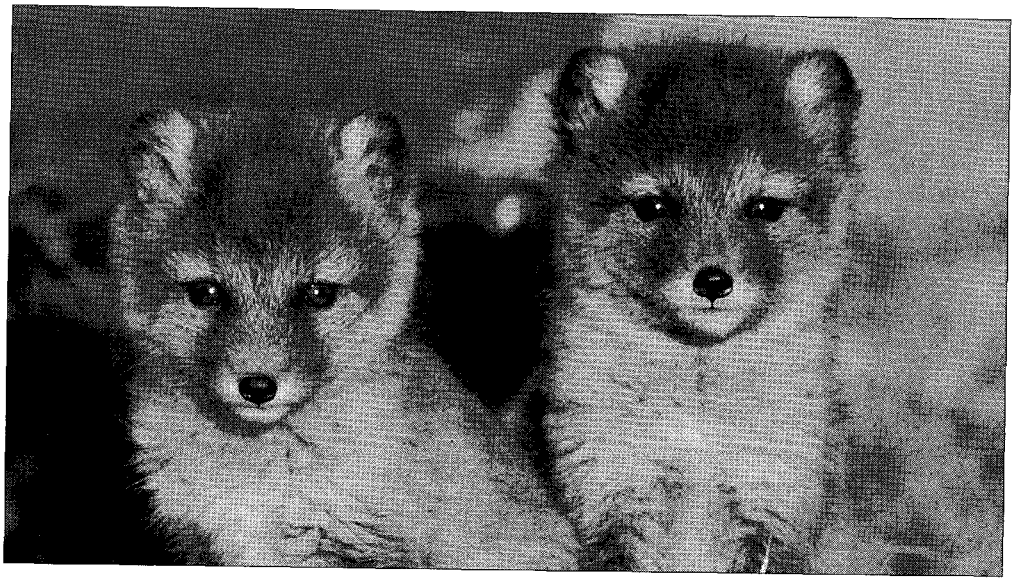

Canine.

Why would you wear these?

They're cute, fluffy little bundles of love—we take them into our homes and our hearts, and we make them part of our families.

Or at least we do that for the puppies in the top picture. The young foxes are from the same canine family, but they'll be caught in traps, or forced to live in confinement and then electrocuted just for people to wear on their backs. It doesn't make sense, does it?

For more information, contact The Humane Society of the United States.

HSUS

The Humane Society of the United States
2100 L Street, NW, Washington, DC 20037

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Wild Should Wild Remain.

"Man always kills the thing he loves, and so we the pioneers have killed our wilderness. Some say we had to. Be that as it may, I am glad I shall never be young without wild country to be young in."

ALDO LEOPOLD

"We need wilderness preserved—as much of it as is still left, and as many kinds . . . It is important to us . . . simply because it is there—important, that is, simply as an idea."

WALLACE STEGNER

"The love of wilderness is more than a hunger for what is always beyond reach. It is also an expression of loyalty to the earth, (the earth which bore us and sustains us), the only home we shall ever know, the only paradise we ever need—if we had the eyes to see."

EDWARD ABBEY

"The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness."

JOHN MUIR

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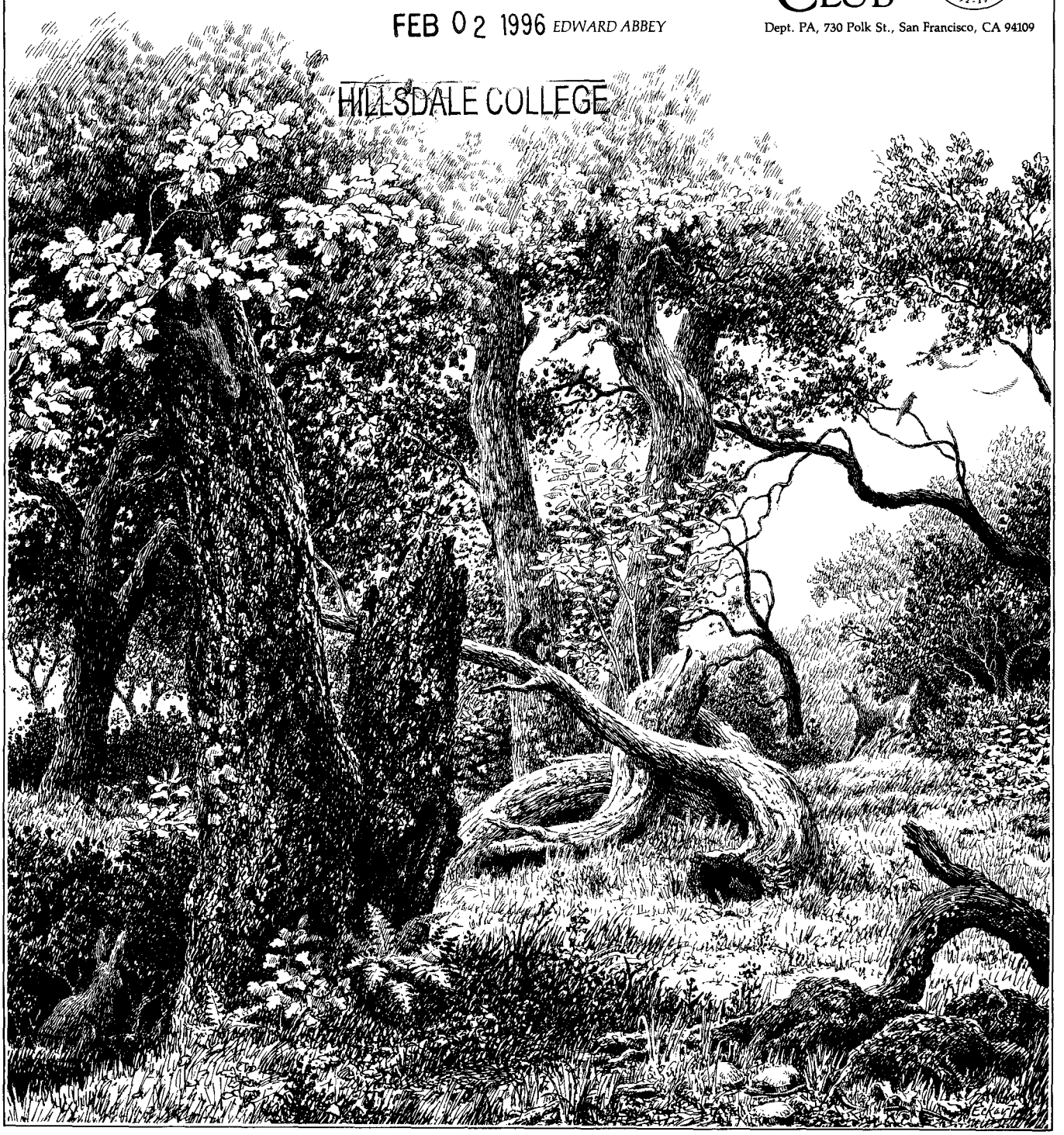

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ABOUT THIS ISSUE

This number marks *The North American Review*'s 181st birthday, in a continuity broken only once (at the onset of World War Two). We note this as a matter of consonance as we commence the last Leap Year, the last Election Year, before the millennium, and as a matter of noting other continuities within our pages. On page 4, Robert Newton continues his delightful and learned discussions of philosophy and religion, moving from demonology to a history of healing. On page 8, Lawrence Sturhahn begins "Cody's Tales," a cross-country trek in pursuit of modern versions of the matriarchy some argue prefigured Western civilization.

We are not, however, all erudition and scholarly speculation. We are literary as well; read Dallas Wiebe's adventure in Hemingway biography and Perry Glasser's discovery of new story collections. Consider Margaret Morganroth Gullette's memoir of her school years, the vagaries of love explored by Mary Soderstrom and Rebecca Baggett, and the downside of self-love revealed by Kerry Cohen.

But in the end, we are nothing if not fun-loving, as witness (speaking of continuity) the latest installment of short fictions starting on page 23, all but one of their authors new to our pages. Quick fixes, but good for what ails you in the new year.

Recent books from NAR contributors include *Literary Luxuries: American Writing at the End of the Millennium* (University of Missouri), by Joe David Bellamy and *May You Live in Interesting Times* (University of Iowa), stories by Tereze Glück.

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THE
NORTH AMERICAN
REVIEW

FOUNDED IN 1815 VOL. 281, NO.1 JANUARY/FEBRUARY 1996

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THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW [ISSN 0029-2397], January/February 1996, Vol 281, No. 1. Published bimonthly, in January, March, May, July, September, November by the University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614-0516. Annual subscription rates $18.00 in the United States and its possessions, $25.00 in Canada, $28.00 in all other countries. Second class postage paid at Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614-9998. Copyright © 1996 by the University of Northern Iowa. Phone/FAX: (319) 273-6455; E-mail: NAR@UNI.EDU. All rights, including translation into other languages, reserved. No part of this periodical may be reproduced in any form without the express written permission of THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW. Opinions expressed by contributors do not necessarily reflect those of the editors or of the University of Northern Iowa. Unsolicited manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed envelope with sufficient postage affixed. *Prose manuscripts will not be considered until January 1st 1997.* Claims for subscriber copies not received must be made within six months of date of publication. POSTMASTER: Send change of address to *The North American Review*, University of Northern Iowa, 1222 W. 27th St., Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614-0516. THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW is indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature, the Humanities Index (including a full-text electronic version), Index to Little Magazines, Index of American Periodical Verse, the Book Review Index, the American Humanities Index, and others. Member of the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses (CLMP). Article reprints and back file volumes in microform are available from University Microfilms International, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106 or 18 Bedford Row, London WCIR 4EJ. U.S. and Canadian newsstand distribution by Eastern News Distributors, Inc., 1130 Cleveland Road, Sandusky OH 44870. PRINTED IN USA.

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Lion Grease:
A Brief History of Healers

ROBERT NEWTON

> Thou thinkest thou hearest and seest devils, black men, etc., it is not so; it is thy corrupt fantasy; settle thine imagination; thou art well. Thou thinkest thou hast a great nose. . . .
>
> —Robert Burton,
> *The Anatomy of Melancholy*

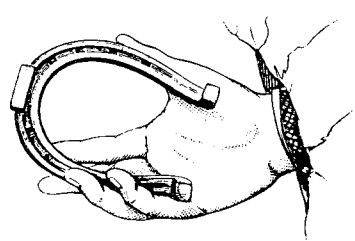
> There she lay, so beautiful that he could not turn his eyes away; and he stooped down and gave her a kiss. But as soon as he kissed her, Briar-rose opened her eyes and awoke, and looked at him quite sweetly.
>
> —The Brothers Grimm,
> "Little Briar-rose"

THE PROBLEM WITH DEMONS was that they had no bodies of their own. That was why they needed us. They had desires. They had the most unwholesome, unspeakable desires, but to fulfill those desires it was necessary to infest someone. If you were sick, the exorcists said, it was because of demon infestation, and being possessed by a great many demons at once caused madness. So the famous Gerasene demoniac, who had four thousand demons, a legion of them, was, of course, boiling mad.

If, however, demons "enter into men's bodies for the sake of sharing *pleasures*," as the author of the *Clementine Recognitions* pointed out, "it is manifest that they are put to flight by suffering." Therefore an exorcist's prescription was for "abstinence, and fasting, and suffering of affliction," and no pleasure whatsoever. After a regimen of asceticism, were it lengthy and pitiless enough, your demons might give up and leave, usually in the form of excrement. Or, since it was an age of miracles, the most powerful exorcists, with the help of spells and gods, might be able to call the demons out, confront them, engage in a battle of wills, defeat them and order them away, like someone ordering birds out of trees.

Perhaps, on the other hand, the problem was not demons at all. Perhaps what you needed, instead, was a street-healer and the roots and herbs and seeds, oils and balms and ointments, that he or she sold at ruinous prices. Such things were always better if they came a great distance at great cost, and if they were a little mythy. Nepenthes, for example, cured grief. A mandrake root, which screamed when pulled from the ground, cured infertility. A dose of moly, such as Odysseus took before visiting Circe, could prevent enchantment. There was hellbore for dandruff, or a dab of bear grease worked as well. Peacock's dung cured gout and mouse's dung cured baldness, if the turds were rubbed on the afflicted place. A little strychnine cured wanton dreams and wild mint cured leprosy.

Apollonius, visiting India, found that sages who lived on a mountaintop had a heat-producing ointment—an ancient Vick's Vap-o-Rub. A gob of the famous Balm of Gilead healed wounds. The Greeks, Pliny said, were very fond of wrestlers and very gullible, and some of them "sold the oil that hath been scraped from the bodies of the said wrestlers for 80 sesterces at a time." The gods, according to Homer, had their own oil and it was, of course, imperishable. Pliny was certain, nonetheless, that nothing was better for the complexion than a little lion grease.



If you did not wish to be exorcised, and did not wish to use the things street-healers sold, there was another possibility. Kings and emperors were so mighty in those days, they could heal.

Tacitus tells the story of the Emperor Vespasian's cures: "One day this fellow threw himself at Vespasian's feet, imploring him with groans to heal his blindness. . . . He asked that it might please the emperor to anoint his cheeks and eyeballs with the water of his mouth." Then a second fellow, with a withered foot, asked if the emperor would "tread upon him with the imperial foot?" The imperial foot and the imperial spit were wonderfully effective. A woman, it was also said, had been cured of blindness when the Emperor Hadrian let her kiss his knee.

An old story told by Pliny had it that King Pyrrhus of Epirus could heal. The king's "great toe of his right foot was good for them that had big, swelled, or indurate spleens, if he did but touch the parties diseased, with that toe." And when King Pyrrhus died and was cremated "that great toe the fire had no power to consume: so, it was bestowed in a little case for the nonce, and hung up in the temple for an holy relic."

If none of these healers, the exorcists, street-healers, emperors and kings, had any appeal for you, you could in the last extremity visit a physician. Hippocrates had announced that "What drugs will not cure, the knife will; what the knife will not cure, the cautery will; what the cautery will not cure must be considered incurable." The physicians were

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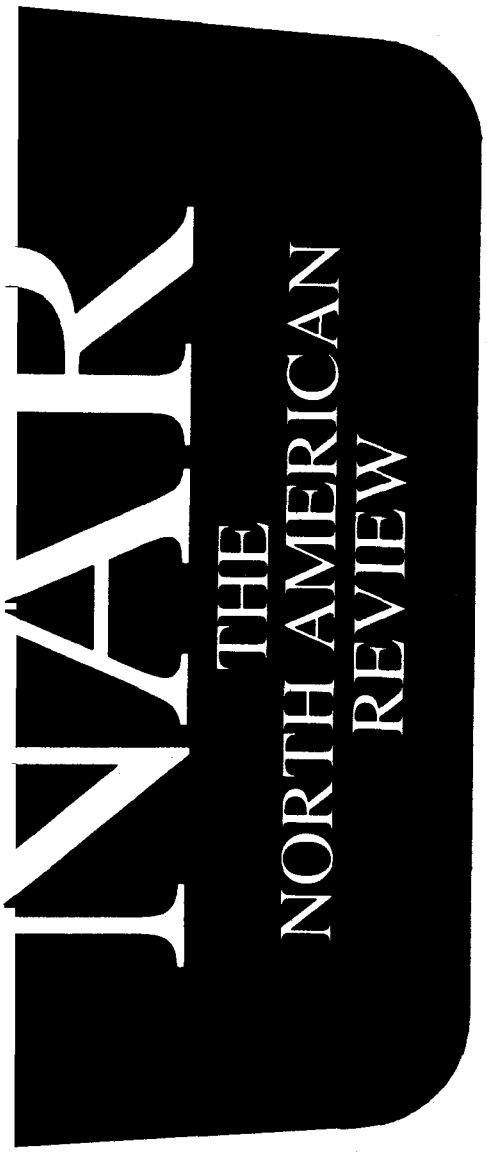
gathering their cruel strength day by day.

A visit to a physician, Tertullian said, was like martyrdom. The patient suffered (Tertullian wrote in *Scorpiace*) "by reason of the lancet, and of the burning iron, and of the great heat of the mustard," and was "cut and burned, and pulled and bitten." Amazingly, "that man who is howling and groaning and bellowing in the hands of a physician will



only ambushed Death at her tomb); Orpheus almost rescued Eurydice, by making Pluto cry iron tears, but then looked back and lost her; and Theseus would have nabbed Persephone, had he not made the mistake of sitting in the Chair of Forgetfulness.

The second method would only work within three days of death, because after that period of time the soul would be gone, and it was only done by prophets. This was the method used by Elisha who, when a boy died,

> went in and shut the door upon the two of them, and prayed to the LORD. Then he went up and lay upon the child, putting his mouth upon his mouth, his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands; and as he stretched himself upon him, the flesh of the child became warm. Then he got up again, and ...d once to and fro in the house, ...ent up, and stretched himself ...him; the child sneezed seven ... and the child opened his eyes.

... third method was very ...ideed, and it had to do with ...uch-sought-after items, and ... do with why mortals are ...n the first place, and we ... well begin all of this in the ...of Eden.

...e was a tree of life in the ... of Eden, and upon the tree ...rew a fruit of life, namely ...l there was an oil of life (a ...intment, Celsus thought) ... by the tree of life, and there ...eek, stream, or river of life ...owed beside the tree of life, ...e things, figs, oil, and water, ...nything. More than this, the ... apples of immortality were ...g in the garden of the ...des, and Gilgamesh in his ... had discovered the plant ... Old-Men-Are-Young-Again, ...is (according to Nikandros) ...ed a perfectly adequate sup- ...outh to the back of an ass and ... long to the world. Why don't ... forever?

...HING WENT wrong. Snakes ... gons (dragons were more or ...nt snakes with wings) took ...ings for themselves and left ... die. But to sort this out we must first let Sir James Frazer repair the story of Eden which appears in Genesis. It cannot be true that Yahweh was such a villain. We must, Frazer wrote,

> suppose that in the original story there were two trees, a tree of life and a tree of death; that it was open to man to eat of the one and live for ever, or to eat of the other and die; that God, out of good will to his creature, advised man to eat of the tree of life and warned him not to eat of the tree of death; and that man, misled by the serpent, ate of the wrong tree and so forfeited the immortality which his benevolent Creator had designed for him.

The snake ate the fruit of the tree of life and that is why snakes shed their skins, renew themselves, and are immortal. Likewise the garden of the Hesperides was held by a snake or dragon, and the load of youth that Zeus sent was taken from the ass by a snake's trickery. It was a snake that stole the plant named Old-Men-Are-Young-Again from Gilgamesh.

Then it occurred to everybody that Eden was still there. The first tenants were evicted, true, but the place was still there and the tree of life was still in it. Why not go there, pick the fruit, catch the oil, bottle the water, live forever? Because the place was lost. No one could find Eden. Some said it was now locked, anyway, and guarded day and night by angels.

Very well then, it occurred to everybody, was it not possible to manufacture an elixir of life, an artificial medicine of immortality? Why not make a vat of it? There was no recipe. What ingredients to use? Ovid said that Medea had a bronze pot under a full moon and she boiled in it

> roots torn from Thessalian valleys,
> Seeds, flowers, plants, and acid distillations,
> And precious stones from the far Orient,
> And sands which the spent tide of Ocean washes,
> The whited frost scooped under the full moon,
> Wings of the weird scritch owl and his torn breast,
> Bowels of the werewolf which shudder and twist
> Into a likeness of mad human faces,
> The scaled skin of a thin-hipped water snake,
> Liver of a long-lived deer, foul eggs,
> And battered head of a crow that outlived
> Eight generations. And with these a thousand things
> Without a name.

Werewolf bowels? Just where did one look for such things? The truth was, one needed the help of drag-

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ons. Medea had the help of dragons, and that was how she made the stuff with which she restored Aeson. Without dragons, it was no use.

Raising the dead was very hard to do.

Then came the colossal news of a physician who had a supply of Gorgon blood.

Asclepius had once been a mortal doctor in Thessaly, but now he was a god. He had been able to cure with his own skills, Pindar said, wounds, fevers, chills, ulcers and grief. Then he received a supply of Gorgon blood from Athena and began to raise the dead. He raised so many of the dead that Hades complained to Zeus. The population of the Underworld was dwindling, he said. Zeus, for the sake of universal order, killed Asclepius with a thunderbolt. Then Zeus reconsidered and restored Asclepius to life, thus making him immortal and a god. The Greeks believed this insupportable story.

Unlikely as it was, the world had a new religion with a physician for a god. Soon his sanctuaries, or Asclepeions, were everywhere. If one wanted to be healed by Asclepius, Greatest of Physicians, one spent a night in an Asclepeion and the god, like the Tooth Fairy, would come in the night. This was the practice of Incubation and this is the way Aelius Aristides, a famous hypochondriac, described the experience:

> You have a sense of contact with him, and are aware of his arrival in a state of mind intermediate between sleep and waking; you try to look up and are afraid to, lest before you see him he shall have vanished; you sharpen your ears and listen, half in dream and half awake; your hair stands up, tears of joy roll down, a proud kind of modesty fills your breast.

Who could compete with that?

THE CHRISTIANS COULD. The Christians were two-fisted exorcists from Palestine. It was they who cured the Gerasene demoniac. Not only that, they healed in every other way. They used holy oil and spells and the laying on of hands. Jesus even healed with spit:

> And some people brought to him a blind man, and begged him to touch him. And he took the blind man by the hand, and led him out of the village; and when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, "Do you see anything?" And he looked up and said, "I see men; but they look like trees, walking." Then again he laid his hands upon his eyes; and he looked intently and was restored, and saw everything clearly.

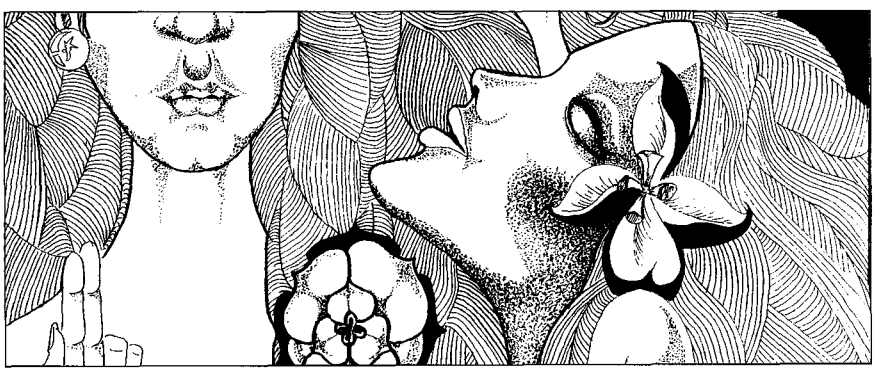
And his clothes could heal: "If I touch even his garments, I shall be made well." It was the same with Peter. In Acts, they "carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on beds and pallets, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them." Even Peter's shadow could heal.

Yes, but could the Christians raise the dead?

No, Paul said.

Only one dead man, Paul said, had ever come back to life. Jesus, he said, was "the first to rise from the dead" and "the first fruits of those who had fallen asleep." Adam had fallen, Jesus had risen, the world was saved, and Yahweh had done it. Theologically, what was the point of raising one another, when the Second Coming was at hand?

There was another point of view.



Surely Jesus raised Lazarus, did he not? It was the most famous case history of all. Jesus stood outside the tomb and said, "Lazarus, come out." It was hopeless. The man had been dead four days. There was no Hebrew ritual, no tremendous medicine, no trip to the Underworld. Jesus ordered Lazarus to come out and out he came, like a miner from a mine.

Paul was a rather unhealthy man and an indifferent healer, but he was tireless. He was run out of Lystra, Philippi, Thessalonica, Beroea, Iconium and Ephesus. "Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned," he said, but his point of view prevailed. His clear, strong theology was needed to defeat the Pagans. That was why the story of Lazarus appeared only in the disputed Gospel of John and not in Matthew, Mark, Luke, or Paul's letters.

The age of miracles was ending. Lazarus himself, though his story was still popular, was never heard of again. The first generation of Christians was gone. If Jesus was coming again to raise all the dead, every last one, it seemed a simple thing to be patient, or polite, and wait. The Christians waited.

"Between the Apostolic age and the fourth century A.D.," Robin Lane Fox tells us, "we know of no historical case when a miracle or an exorcism turned an individual, let alone a crowd, to the Christian faith."

There were no miracles for almost three hundred years.

IT WAS EXACTLY the third of May of the year 326, according to Gregory of Tours, when Helena, eighty-year-old mother of the emperor Constantine, while bashing around Palestine, discovered three crosses in the ground. She had each cross, one after another, laid on a coffin. When the third cross, the True Cross, touched the coffin, the corpse awakened.

A second age of miracles had begun. No new and wonderful healers appeared, it was true. But it was discovered, as the ancient world declined, that the relics, or pieces, of

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the great healers of the past still had power to heal, like the durable toe of King Pyrrhus. There was this bit of Old Testament justification for relics:

> So Elisha died and they buried him. Now bands of Moabites used to invade the land in the spring of the year. And as a man was being buried, lo, a marauding band was seen and the man was cast into the grave of Elisha; and as soon as the man touched the bones of Elisha, he revived, and stood on his feet.

The Apostles healed again and anything associated with Jesus and Mary healed. Vials of Mary's milk and tears were found and the blood of Jesus, it seemed, had been caught at the foot of the cross. Soon the world was full of relics. Prince Frederick the Wise, before the Protestants decided things had gone too far, collected 19,000 relics, including a crumb from the Last Supper.

Calvin was furious. By his day, he said, so much timber of the True Cross had been discovered that three hundred men could not have carried it up Golgotha. So much of Mary's milk had been found, "if the holy Virgin had been a cow" she could not have produced it.

Some said that saints could heal by the laying on of hands. That Pagan practice, once performed by the priests of Asclepius and Sabazius, remained in use. The saints themselves never claimed this power. Saint Augustine, dying in a city under siege by the Vandals, laid his hands on a sick man who came to him, but said, "If I had the gift you say I have, I would be the first to try it on myself." Augustine listed the miracles performed with relics, and argued that now Christian dead men performed more miracles than Pagan gods, but on his death-bed he was tended by physicians. Healing had become a lost art.

Abelard, in the 12th century, said he "marvelled and laughed" to see two bungling healers try to raise the dead. Erasmus observed, in the 16th century, that by then no one could be found "who could heal just one lame horse." Jeremy Taylor, in the 17th century, noted that "not so much as a chicken is nowadays cured of the pip by holy water. . . ."

In the 14th century there was a report that the water of life had been found at last. It was in Ceylon, according to the *Voiage and Travaile of Sir John Mandeville*. Mandeville found a well that somehow got its water from the Garden of Eden,

> and whoso drinketh three times fasting of the water of that well, he is whole of all manner of sickness that he hath. And they that dwell there and drink often of that well, they never have sickness and they seem always young. I have drunk there three or four times, and me thinks I am better already.

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There were also announcements, from time to time, of wonderful new pills and elixirs. But the Universal Medicine invented by Paracelsus, according to Francis Barrett, was really only "certain little pills of the colour, figure, and size of mouse-turds, which were nothing but *opium*." Butler's Universal Medicine, in the 17th century, was, apparently, "Oil of Olives." Sir Kenelm Digby's Powder of Sympathy was only green vitriol.

The infamous Count Cagliostro sold Beautifying-water, a Pill of Egypt for impotence, and an Extract of Saturn for everything. He claimed that he, the last great healer, could raise the dead. The Count "collected his followers about him," Wilson Wallis wrote, "to witness the resurrection of the atheist, D'Alembert. The Encyclopedist appeared, a skeleton wrapped in a winding sheet, and assured them that there was no other world—presumably not even the one from which he had come." Count Cagliostro also claimed to have discovered the secret of eternal life, and said that he would live forever. He died in prison, age fifty-one.

The physicians had won.

THERE ARE STILL healers in the world. In tents in Virginia and Kentucky they heal "high blood" and "sweet blood" and bad backs, but meanwhile the physicians are sewing on limbs, transplanting organs, and remodeling the unhandsome Adam and the imperfect Eve with plastic surgery. While the healer shouts the name of Jesus into the ears of the hard-of-hearing, the physicians can defibrillate a fibrillating heart, raise the dead with epinephrine, keep the comatose alive, make a test-tube baby cry. We live as long as dragons.

The healer lays his hands upon the sick, but the sick do not begin to glow with health and youth. They fall on the ground as if killed.

The physician, in his hospital, gives a princess a little liposuction, a tuck, a lift, some breast implants.

The Christians wait.

The anæsthetist wakes Briar-rose from sleep. □

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Fran

LAWRENCE STURHAHN

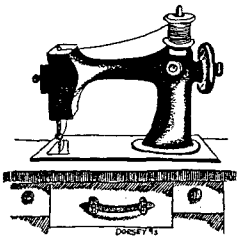
An Introduction

THE PAST COUPLE of years, I've made several trips into the "real west" (to me, that land that lies between the wide Missouri and the west coast range). I kept a road journal: the way the country looked—the seeming infinite distances under the big sky—other travelers passed along the way—some history. And from those trips I always returned to a place called home.

This year's different. Home is going to be my Motorhome, an old Cortez, named the "Robin L." And—I'm not sure I'm coming back. I have a tentative route, some ideas about where I'm going—Nevada: the Black Rock Desert, Pyramid Lake and funky old Reno; the southwest: Arizona and New Mexico, Tucson and Taos and Silver City; The Plains: Wyoming, Nebraska and the Dakotas: Devil's Tower, Paha Sapa and the Rosebud Reservation. I'll visit vortexes and spiritual places I've heard about, return to others I've been to before. Out there in all that space are medicine circles, sweat lodges, powwows, sacred mountains and historic rivers: I'll go to them.

Not planning how long I'll be gone, not knowing exactly where I'm going, I won't care how long it takes to get there. Avoid the Interstates, I think. With time enough, and money enough (carefully budgeted), and love enough—why hurry? Besides, from the Interstates everything's homogenized—4 lanes, big green signs, tourists and fast food. A Taco Bell in Reno's the same as a Taco Bell in Billings. The back roads will be different, closer to the spirit the womb of the land, closer to the people who live on it. Why, the Robin L might be the only Motorhome I'll see in a day.

It feels different from my other trips; I'm looking through the windshield with new eyes. And I take on a new rhythm, too. It's sidereal rhythm, the dark nights lit by the stars and the cyclical moon. Driving late, then pulling into a roadside rest or a restaurant parking lot to sleep. Waking up to make some notes or read a little...eat...drive on. If I grow tired during the day I can pull over and take a nap—or I can stop and spend a couple of days. With time and money and love enough, there's no matter. With the cigarette lighter adapter for the computer I can write anytime, anywhere.



The prospect is exciting. I read John Stein-beck's *Travels with Charley* many years ago and I remember it fondly. I have my dog Cody with me, so I'm doing my travels with Cody, only it's 34 years later—and a very different world.

IT WAS ABOUT ELEVEN o'clock on a cold night in central Nevada when I drove into the town of Tonopah, which is six thousand feet high and has all these brand new motels that don't look like the paint is dry or that anybody is staying in them. I stopped to get gas at one of those 24-hour quick-stops. This one had a sign on the door—"The Giggle Springs Delicatessen & Bakery." Inside, behind the counter, was an attractive zoftik blond woman named Sandy.

I asked her why all the motels, and she said Tonopah was the big watering hole on the road half way between Vegas and Reno—maybe that was it.

Stop here and get your hit at the tables and go away a millionaire—the American dream, I thought.

Or maybe it's because of the mines, she went on. "The big one does five hundred ounces a week, at four hundred backs an ounce—that's a lot of gold."

I was never very good at math, but that seems to come out to being 200,000 bucks. Like Sandy said, a lot of gold!

Sandy's from North Dakota, Mandan/Bismark—an emigre from that most beautiful land of the northern great plains; she hadn't been home in five years and missed her family. She missed the plains. Her boyfriend—a miner who makes good money plying his trade—is why she's in Tonopah. But she feels stuck. She shrugged. "Have to follow the money," she said. "Tonopah ain't exactly a garden spot—winter or summer, but it's the summers that are the shits. In Vegas last summer, a couple of times, the high was a hundred and thirty-eight degrees."

Sandy's moving up the road to Goldfield next week. She shook her head about that, too. "If there's not much in Tonopah, you ought to see Goldfield! Hellfire, I'll be sitting on my porch, wishing there was something green and growing to see..." Sandy likes it where it's green—not just this old dry brown desert everywhere.

It was cold outside when I started to leave, walking back bemused to the old Cortez, feeling how much Sandy wanted to be someplace where it was green. In the black sky above, the stars were sharp pin-

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points of light. An icy wind howled around a corner, torn newspapers carried on it as if they were alive.

And suddenly then I knew what I'd write about on this trip.

AMONG THE MANY THINGS I've come to learn in the past couple of years is that, between the male and female genders, women are the power beings. That's the way it used to be in Goddess times, five thousand years ago (and this world would be better off if it were still that way today!). I thought, the trouble is a lot of women don't appear to know about those ancient times. Competing with men, being equal to men (and becoming masculinized in the process)—that's been a major concern in Feminism since its onset. Well and good, and so it should be, but other than the fact that both sexes are a part of the human species, there are major differences between us. Righting the wrongs inherent in sexism—that's only a part of the whole. What about the power in just being a woman that the ancients celebrated? There's not a lot out there about that—yet.

And now we are going into a new age and there's no question but that it's hard. The old paradigm, belief systems reinforced by the immediately-past 400 years of history, are being forced to change. And part of that is women bringing that ancient consciousness back, putting it up to us men. This cultural wasteland we live in now—it cries out for a spiritual consciousness, a nurturance for the Mother Earth. It cries out for what women have—the courage of the bear.

That's what I'd write about on my journey, I thought that cold night in Tonopah. I'd talk to the women I met along the way. I'd listen to what they say. I'd write it down and call it "Cody's Tales."

FIVE THOUSAND YEARS ago one locus of human civilization lay in what we now call the Near East, between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, in Sumeria, Mesopotamia, and Egypt. Highly evolved cultures, they were matriarchies: the Time of the Goddess. Ishtar - Inanna - Eresh-Kigal - Astart - Kali - Sophia—different names for the core concept of a female supreme being who created the universe, established its laws, was the ruler of nature, the arbiter of fate, time, truth, wisdom, justice, love, birth and death. Gaia, the mother, earth.

For three thousand years civilization was in sway to the power of woman. And one characteristic of this belief system was no separation between what was spiritual and what was sexual. The act of sexual intercourse was divine, a reënactment of union with the Goddess, whose temples were served by priestesses who dispensed the grace of the Goddess through intercourse. Men came to have sex with them, to partake of woman's power, to be cleansed, to have their morality restored. What our benighted age calls prostitution was—according to Deena Metzger, Barbara Walker and other heretical modern women—holy.

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Metzger writes:

> The original whore was a priestess, the conduit to the divine, the one through whose body one entered the sacred arena and was restored. Warriors, soldiers, soiled by combat within the world of men, came to the Holy Prostitute, the Quedishtu (literally meaning "the undefiled one") in order to be cleansed and reunited with the gods (Goddess).

According to Barbara Walker in her fascinating *Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*:

> Sexuality was reverenced in cultures where the female principle was accorded freedom and honor, as in Egypt, where women chose and wooed their lovers at will. Egyptians described carnal knowledge as 'knowing a woman perfectly,' and regarded it as a joy.

What happened to all this was that about 250 B.C. came the patriarchy—and it all changed. Spirituality and sexuality were split, the former now almost lost in banal liturgy, the latter secularized.

Metzger again: "In a sacred universe, the prostitute is a holy woman, a priestess. In a secular universe the prostitute is a whore. In this distinction is the agony of our lives."

1. Fran

SO, THE FIRST PART of my journey with Cody I was in Nevada. December and January, at Pyramid Lake, in mud, snow and rain of the Black Rock desert, in funky Reno—the original gamblers' town where, before divorce was as easy as going to a supermarket to buy cheese and you wanted one, you went to Reno and established residency for six weeks--whiling away the waiting days in the garish casinos. Nevada is also the one state in fifty where prostitution is legal and carefully controlled.

Aware of the Goddess, her time in history, and the sacred prostitute, I wondered to myself what do the madams of Nevada brothels think about all that? Do they see themselves as carrying a legacy that goes back five thousand years? Do they know the weight of history their "girls" embrace, lying on their backs? I thought, I'll stop in a brothel, talk to a Madam, and ask.

On the Nevada back roads (not the Interstates) brothels are not hard to see, especially at night. They have flashing lights and arrows and easy-to-read suggestive names and parking lots in front. Just north of Beatty (which is like the east entrance to Death Valley) I passed "Star Ranch" and somebody in me said, *that's the place.* Driving on into Beatty, I stopped and looked in the phone book, found the number, and called and spoke to Fran who was the madam. I said I was an itinerant writer, and I wanted to interview her. "Sure," she said.

I drove back and parked in the parking lot. A dog was barking from someplace as I walked up to the door and rang the bell. Fran opened

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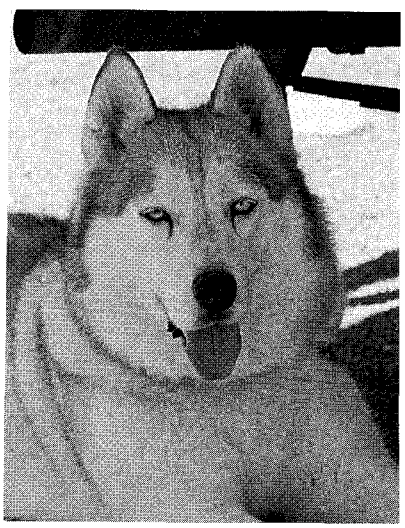
it, a pleasant looking woman, wearing glasses, a modest plain dress. The grandmotherly type. I had some research material about Goddess times, and I offered it to her, said I'd go back to the Robin L, have my breakfast while she looked at what I brought. I'd come back in an hour and then we could talk.

"Boring," Fran said when I came back. "Very boring...I couldn't get into reading any of it."

"Couldn't, huh?" I was disappointed, but I persisted. "You know," I said, "that back before the advent of Christianity, this world and many of its ancient cultures were run by women—matriarchies. And in those days prostitution was a sacred form of religion...prostitutes worked in the temples, and men would come to them, make love with them in order to get power from them—because, back then, men recognized that women were more powerful.... So part of what Christianity did was to change that. Also recognizing that women were more powerful, in order to take that power over it made women bad, made the idea of prostitution bad—all of that. You ever hear any of that stuff?"

"Oh, some, maybe. Not too much..."

"That article by Deena Metzger," I said, "she's talking about that, and there are women now who are trying to bring back those days when women had their power. That's one of the reasons I'm doing this interview with you...this article...this work...I'm interested in how people, and women feel about it. So, how long have you had this place here?"



Twenty-three years, and her last name was York—she didn't care if I published it. Originally she's from Omaha, Nebraska. And she'd come to be in Beatty, Nevada, because...

"Well, a friend of mine wanted me to run a place for him, so I came up here and looked at places for sale. I looked at this one, and went up the road to Winnamucca...I think it was. But I liked the one here, so he bought it, and I ran it on the understanding that when I wanted to I'd buy it.

"Would you call yourself a madam?"

"Yeah, I am."

"So when you came here you were already—so to speak—in the business?"

"Oh, yes..."

"Were you ever a prostitute yourself?"

"Sure...In South Dakota... Deadwood, South Dakota."

"And have you been married?"

"Sure..."

"Children?"

"One...a daughter...up in Furman."

"Is she in the business, too, so to speak?"

"No, she's a beautician."

"Any bad feelings on her part—about what you do?"

"Not at all."

"Well, you strike me as being a very warm and open person, you know..."

She did strike me that way—matter of fact, to the point, maybe a little brusque, but why not? (After all, some man drops in off the road, and he's not looking for anything but talk, what's this all about?) But she seemed warm and caring, too. In fact, she reminded me of my grandmother, whom I dearly loved, who died quickly and easily in no travail, a happy woman at the age of 96—the only functional member of my family. Had she known, she'd have been a Goddess woman, for sure. And perhaps she did know.

"So, how many girls do you have here?" I asked. "You call them *girls*?"

"Yup...one today. I usually keep two or three."

"Where do they come from? Local—or from Vegas? Or someplace else special?"

"They come from all over. This girl's from Milwaukee, and she lives on the place."

Fran lives here, too. Star Ranch is her home.

But her clientele come from all over, maybe California mostly, she said. Then, too, she has "fellas" who come from back East once or twice a year. They stay in Beatty, or sometimes right at "Star Ranch," for as long as a week.

"Really?" I said, "so they're kind of like your friends then?"

"Well, you might say so."

On such occasions—if she needs them, if she's short—she brings in extra girls. She calls friends of hers in Las Vegas, or she calls the other houses, to see if they have any they don't need. The way Fran talks, and the way she smiles, I believe she has many friends, and in that way she's like my grandmother, too.

"Have you ever brought a girl into the business?" I asked.

"No," Fran said.

And she doesn't serve any liquor—her house rule. Not because she has anything particular against alcohol. "Just I don't think that guys come out here to get a drink," she said. "They come to see the girls, and I don't see that alcohol mixes with sex. A guy can't do anything when he gets to drinking."

It was a comfortable room we were sitting in, overstuffed furniture, pictures on the walls, a soft-drink machine in an alcove, soft lamps with big shades.

"Do you have social occasions where people sort of sit around and talk—or party, or anything like that?" I asked.

"Sure," she said, "they sit around and talk quite a bit. The girls come in, and I introduce them, and they talk with the guys."

"Basically it's kinda the girl's choice then, whether she wants to make it with a guy?"

"No, not necessarily. I mean, they're customers and they're supposed to be taken care of. We serve 'em coffee, and there's soft drinks in that machine over there. The girls tell 'em what they've got. That's it. And

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the prices— They make the prices and I get a cut off each one-half."

I guess it must have showed on my face that maybe I thought that was extreme, even ignorant of the economics of the overhead it took to run a brothel (laundry and cleaning and medical examinations and such). Fran must have seen my expression because she said quickly, "I wouldn't be in business long if I took less."

She needs to trust the girls to keep an honest accounting, and if that doesn't happen, the girl goes.

I asked if she had a particular reputation? Was she well-known? Fran answered that she was well-known, not only throughout the state, but all over the country. She'd been on TV. Oprah Winfrey. Dinah Shore. Sally Jesse Raphael. *Late Friday Night* in Chicago.

"It feels to me," I said, "like you're a happy women."

"Oh, I am. Except I'd like to sell the place now. I'm asking four-hundred-fifteen thousand..."

"You want to retire?"

"I've been here twenty-two years. I'm ready to retire. I'm gettin' pretty old. I'll be 70 my next birthday."

"You don't look it."

"Thanks. But I'm ready—yeeeeessss."

In my travels in Nevada over a number of years I'd heard or read someplace that the state sanctions brothels and prostitutes for the practical and philosophical reason that if you don't give men some place to sow their wild oats, they tend to bar room fights, driving too fast, and other sorts of violent antisocial behavior, not to forget rape. I never saw any statistics on this, but it seems it was some police chief in Elko or Winnemucca who said it. Anyway, as far a cry as it is from sacred prostitution, I thought I would ask Fran what she thought.

"Well," she scoffed, "that's that way all over the country with men, isn't it? Not just Nevada."

I was thinking about the conservatism and prudery of the New Right and the prejudice of the Christian Fundamentalists, and Nevada has never been known as a bastion of liberalism as far as I know, so I wondered if there was any movement in the state to "clean up" the act, shutter places like Star Ranch?

"No," Fran said, "certainly not here in Beatty. The ladies here in town like it open."

"They do. How come?"

"To protect their daughters, make it safe to walk on the street, and when their sons get old enough...they can come out here and find out what sex is all about."

So, maybe here is some kind of temple after all. I said, "You're serving the people in a special way..."

"Oh, I guess you could call it that," Fran said with a smile. "I'm a member of the Chamber of Commerce. In fact, I was one of the first members here in Beatty. There were five of us who started it."

"Fran," I said, "basically you're a pillar of the community, so to speak..."

Driving down the short gravel road from Star Ranch to Highway 95, I crossed the airstrip that I'd seen and not understood when I drove in. Well, I thought, that explains that, that's how men from all over get to Fran to be cleansed and calmed and renewed. They just fly in. □

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Protocol for Research

A Story by Mary Soderstrom

Stewart stands in the kitchen, alone. He is a theorist, not an experimentalist, and he is thinking about how, under certain circumstances, symmetry is broken when electrons are lined up in a magnetic field. In his right hand is a coffee pot, in his left, a coffee cup. Slowly he pours the coffee from the pot to the cup. He does not notice that only part of the stream goes into the cup. It is up to his wife, Dorothy, a noted student of the real world, to scream at him as she comes in the door.

"What in the world do you think you're doing?" she asks. Her arms are full with sacks of groceries, or she would rush toward him and relieve him of the coffee pot. Their oldest boy no longer lives with them, and the three girls are all busy elsewhere this Saturday afternoon. Dorothy is annoyed that she has to carry in groceries. She is more annoyed by the puddle on the floor, by the splashes of coffee on Stewart's light beige cotton trousers.

Stewart looks up, snapped back to reality by his wife's voice. His gut begins to hurt again, and he realizes coffee is the last thing he needs now anyway.

This is a physicist observed.

In the beginning it was the waves that fascinated him. Later when he'd learned more, he realized that what he liked about the waves, was really the patterns, the ways of organizing how you looked at things. The beginning of knowledge.

But at first he thought of waves, the way wind pushed up the water on the pond at Beaver Lake. His mother had no idea what caused waves, but being a teacher, she had him go and look in the encyclopedia at the Atwater Library. He found the explanation hard to follow: for several days he gnawed at what he'd copied from the article, until finally he thought he understood about the molecules of of water moving up and around, to form the appearance of something moving on the surface of the water.

That was when he was eight. The following year he began to think of numbers as waves, too. Choppy and small waves at first, like those near the edge: the primes, which can only be multiplied by themselves and 1, like 2, 3, and 5. Then bigger waves, like 12 and 18 and 20, where more and more different numbers can be fitted in. Factors, they're called, but he didn't know the word, any more than he knew what a prime number was. He only had the picture of the number-waves in his head, growing bigger occasionally and then decreasing suddenly now and then to form a prime. A lake, perhaps, stretching away from him, so that he could not see the great waves that might lie beyond, lost in the fog

He began to make charts so he could navigate. He started with 2, and 3, making long lists of multiples: 2,4,8,10,12.... and 3,6,9,12... He marked the multiples they shared with red pencil. Then he did the same with other colors for other numbers. After a week of working after school, he transferred the colors onto a master list of numbers. Beautiful, he thought, when he tacked his first banner of 500 on his wall.

Another morning: Stewart stands there, coffee cup in hand, forty-four, forty-five years old, he never can remember which; it is an article of faith with him that birthdays aren't important. This time he is in his office and Rachelle's calculations of spin waves in magnets are spread out on the desk in front of him: three pages of definition and notation. The mistake in the math is elementary, and he should have seen it before. He is losing his touch here at McGill, he is having trouble understanding what is going on.

McGill is a backwater, but he'd been warned. It had a cyclotron which would be shortly outclassed, it had a strong experimental tradition dating back to the father of nuclear physics Rutherford, it had experimentalists who were barely speaking to theoreticians. But after the War, after Berkeley, after the Redchasing, a backwater was what Stewart wanted—a hole to hide in and do his calculations

No moral questions about bigger and better bombs, just a chance to look at the mind of God.

Rachelle knocks on the open door, then steps inside. "Do you see the problem?" she asks. She comes in. She is a graduate student, about twenty-five, as tall as he is, and just as smart, he is sure. "It can't *be*. You continue with the reasoning and you end up with infinities everywhere. It just doesn't work."

Stewart smiles at her. She is right of course. The whole problem doesn't make much sense, if you take into account what the bright guys at Cornell and Columbia and Cal Tech are talking about: a zoo full of sub-atomic particles and situations where mirrors don't reverse themselves any more, where symmetry is broken. What Stewart and Rachelle have is a puny problem, taken from a puny view of the universe, and he knows he ought to help the one graduate student who

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could understand what was going on to find a better problem.

"Sure," he says. "But it may be salvageable."

She reaches over to take the sheets. She is frowning, she is upset. "It is not a very interesting problem anyway," she says.

"Wait," Stewart says. "Wait until you see this." He picks up a piece of chalk and goes over to the blackboard, wondering exactly what he is going to say to save this one.... His gut turns over once, but he tells himself it is just because it is late and he isn't going to get home for dinner.

Actually he had been surprised to find he liked teaching. Because of the War and everything, he didn't start in a formal way until he was over thirty, and he knew he was more nervous than he'd have been if he'd been younger. But it wasn't all that bad: he sometimes thought he conveyed a little of the excitement of science to the people in his elementary physics classes who would never take another science class in their lives.

That was important, he thought, because he believed that one of the best-kept secrets of the modern world is just how exciting science was. He considered himself lucky to have discovered that, when he was twelve or so and saw a periodic table for the first time. He still remembered just the way the winter sun shone on the chemistry book the young man who rented their spare bedroom was studying. They were in the kitchen. Stewart stood behind him, drying dishes. His mother was out shopping and in fifteen minutes he was supposed to meet her to help her carry home the heavier things. He knew he had to be on time; he'd heard too many times her explanation, always gentle, always reasonable, about how she could not do everything herself because she was more than a mother, she was the family breadwinnner.

Every time Stewart heard it he felt guilty, as if he were to blame for her tiredness and his embarrassment. He knew he should be on time this Saturday morning, particularly because the day was brilliant with fresh snow and he wanted the work done so he could go sledding with his friends.

But he hadn't counted on the chemistry book. Stewart looked at it, absently, over the young man's shoulder. His first thought was that it was written in some language other than English. The two letter words in each of the boxes made no sense. Then below, in smaller type, he read the names of the elements. "What's that?" he asked. There were ten minutes left before he had to leave.

The young man explained, in the most simplified way: Stewart was just a kid after all. But before the boy left he got a promise that he could look at the book later, and he reflected on the chart's beauty all weekend. The orderly arrangement of elements by the number of electrons they have in their outer shell, the fact that the fewer electrons there were the more highly reactive, the idea that putting two gases like hydrogen and oxygen together could make water: all the ideas intrigued him, made him marvel, made him want to understand. It almost seemed that by understanding why and how he could understand the rest that there was to know about the world, that in understanding this he would understand the mind of God.

The mind of God: yes, he even mentioned that once to Dorothy when they were young and he was trying to explain just what the fascination was. She had said she understood, but he doubted if she did.

The mind of God meant less to Rachelle than to Stewart. For him, it meant the genius that animated the world through the laws of physics. For her, it meant God and his rules, an argument that the Sisters and her father had used to try to keep her from physics.

Even Stewart didn't take her seriously when he met her. By accident she'd been assigned space next to Stewart's office, and he wanted it for another graduate student who appeared to be on the trail of something interesting dealing with mesons.

"Excuse me," he said when he walked into the room where she was sitting at the lab table. Had she been standing, had he had to look in her brown, unwavering eyes on the same level as his, he might have looked away, and talked only about the lab assignments which had put her in the wrong place. But she was brushing her thick brown hair. On the way to the university that morning, something unpleasant had fallen on her head—a bird dropping, probably. She hadn't intended to undo her hair, but she found it impossible to clean while it was still tied back, so she'd shaken it loose. The brushing was just the preparation for braiding it again.

She looked up at him, holding the mass of hair back with her right hand. She knew who he was, although they hadn't been introduced. She blushed. The nuns had been charmed when she blushed; it was the one thing that was seemly about this too-smart girl. Only Soeur Lorraine had been impatient when she blushed, Soeur Lorraine had urged her to go to McGill for physics because McGill had a cyclotron and the Université de Montréal didn't.

Rachelle tossed her hair back over her shoulder and sat straighter. She wondered if she should explain about the bird, and then was more embarrassed. Why would he care?

"Miss Tremblay," he said. The office would do for her, he decided. He could walk down the hall to talk to the other researcher.

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Stewart sits in his office, insisting he doesn't know when it began. It is, he tells Rachelle, as if he looked up from his work sheets one afternoon to discover that the giants were all dying and that he had an excruciating pain in his gut.

She listens to him, politely. She was surprised to find him being sick in a waste basket. She is even more surprised that he wants to talk now after he has cleaned up after himself. When he went down the hall to the men's room, he had said to wait, so she had waited like a good girl. But she had not expected confession.

"Fermi and Lawrence, Einstein and the Curies: all dead," he says to her, trying to see if she knows what this might mean. "And Oppenheimer out of the game, really." "Have you seen a doctor?" she asks after a moment. In her hands are three photos taken from an article by the group at Cornell, and a note pad on which she'd written the calculations. Her handwriting is small and precise and European. Stewart has trouble reading it.

"No," he says and turns away. He shuts his eyes. The way she folds her hands on the desk in front of her makes him think of the convent girl she must have been, waiting patiently. She's too smart for that; she knows enough to go looking for answers on her own. He's seen the light in her eyes when she's on to something, he knows she's as hooked as he is. He's lucky, he knows, to have graduate students like her, people who have ideas; he sees now just how thin on the ground they can be. Who'd ever have thought that the quest for the quiet life might be a curse.

Before, when he'd been her age, he wanted to be in the middle of it. Then there'd been the War, and, like it or not in retrospect, he'd been where the action was. He'd even followed Oppenheimer back to Berkeley in large part because he'd wanted all the excitement to last.

"No," he says to Rachelle. "I haven't seen a doctor. It's nothing."

Some observations about Stewart L. Rice: he is above medium height, and was quite slim as a young man. But after the War, he put on weight when he began to drink a lot. At first he only looked thicker in the shoulders and chest, but by the time he was fifty, he carried before him a belly that embarrassed him when he saw himself by accident in a mirror. In the morning when he shaved, he would have also seen in the mirror a drunken tracery of blood vessels across his nose, but by then he had learned not to look too closely at some things.

What he did is not easy to explain. He went each morning to his office and sat in front of paper on which the previous day he had scrawled certain equations. The waves and the elements had carried him a long way.

Some days he stared at his equations all day, and stared at them all night, through the haze of his sleep. Other days he would copy things over on the blackboard, and sit on his desk instead of in front of it.

He published a half-dozen articles during those years, and he taught classes to graduate and undergraduate students. But he spent most of his time thinking about the particles, about the blasted symmetry, about the mind of God. The only problem was that lately his thinking seemed to go around in circles, to snake back on itself, to be overwhelmed by the evidence so he could no longer find the patterns.

Rachelle is making a pot of tea, and she has her back to him, washing out a cup and saucer in the little sink in the corner of her room. Outside it is snowing, has been snowing for some time, and the streetcars and traffic are probably still snarled. That is why Stewart is here and not at home, or so he tells himself. No point in trying to get home for a while yet, he told Dorothy when he called her to say he would stay late.

Rachelle lives two blocks from McGill, just around the corner from where Stewart grew up. He has not told her yet, he may never. He knew, however, exactly what her room would look like before he climbed the stairs behind her. The only difference between what he imagined and what he sees, is that the room is cleaner.

Right now she dumps the things in the dishpan, then turns on the hot water, hard. The sound roars in Stewart's ears. He shuts his eyes as if that might help keep the sound out. He knows that it is dangerous to continue sitting in this warm room, with that woman over there. They are supposed to be talking about her thesis, but he cannot even remember what he has just suggested she do next.

She has broad hips, and nice legs, he notices again. Her hair is coming out of the arrangement at the back of her neck. The sink is too low for her to work at comfortably. This is definitely not a domestic arrangement.

There have been a couple of other women in his life. No one recently, however, not even when Dorothy was so unhappy. And never a student, he's stayed clear of that; students complicate things too much, and besides there never are many women in physics. Temptation has been relatively easy to avoid.

Now Rachelle is saying over her shoulder: "Perhaps Feinberg is right and there are two neutrinos."

At the moment Stewart is willing to grant Feinberg or anyone else two neutrinos. The implications are great for particle theory, for a coherent view of the building blocks of the universe. At the moment, however, Stewart is thinking of standing up, of walking over to Rachelle, of what it would feel like to press this big

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woman to him: mouth against mouth, breast against breast, groin against groin. A perfect fit, symmetry conserved. He feels himself growing to meet the challenge.

So he stands up.

"Did I tell you," she says, turning around, wiping her hands on a towel, "that I sent for the information about the post-doc at Cornell?" She is smiling. He shouldn't be surprised, he had mentioned it to her.

But something is wrong, he realizes, as the blood rushes from his head. He sees flashes cross his field of vision like the tracks the particles make in the bubble chamber as they transform themselves and then transform themselves again. Not here, he says to himself as he feels his knees buckle underneath him. The crash of his chair as he knocks it over sounds far away, lost somewhere in the roar of the water.

Dorothy took care of him, of course. He needed bed rest and a change of diet, and less stress in his life, the doctors said. No more coffee, and it was a good thing that he'd already stopped smoking. Ulcers were rarely life-threatening, they added. They are just a bloody pain.

Stewart laughed obligingly each time one of them said that. Dorothy even smiled the first time, pressing her lips together and forcing them to turn up. She had not asked why Rachelle had gone to the emergency room with him, and he did not offer any explanation.

He only missed giving two lectures, and even though that spring he stayed home the days he was not teaching, he tried to keep up with the rest of the work, too. He read the journals, he wrote letters of reference, he talked to his graduate students. Even Rachelle, on the telephone.

But his work....well, he said to himself, sometimes you have dry periods, sometimes the heading to follow just doesn't seem clear. Be patient, he thought. Eventually you will see the way.

In the meantime, in the evening he drank not because it made the patterns any clearer, but because it made the mind of God easier to forget. □

STEVE ORLEN

LITERATURE

First crush, first sex, first cigarette...
Exposed now, on the table, as he is telling me
The story of his childhood, and I, mine, in brief
Muscular spurts on a backyard deck, although his
Is always the more interesting, more revealing, rougher,
Sadder—*first fight, first theft, first lie*—shameful
Really, terrifying, the things he'd done—*I chased*
And caught him at the bottom of the hill—a bully
And a petty thief, a runaway, a little punk...
Though it occurs to me he's telling something less
This time: He is, in some essential way, creating *distance*
While gazing at the house, his wife, the lawn, that creosote,
The wall over which a bougainvillea struggles,
And to make a shape for Time, to make it fit
A tree, say, that mock orange beside the fountain
Over there, he is shaping it the way a writer
Shapes a novel, with plot, the seed, the act,
With artifice, elaboration in the branches, with self
A character like any other, each instance
Toward a climax and an aftermath, each anecdote
Toward a universal—*fear, want, self-hatred, pride*—
Though the universals are only him, his particular life,
As writers shape their stories into useful wholes.

And then, in my friend's eyes, a sudden blunt surprise.
Disgust now, despair, yes, unforgiving, as though
He hadn't ever quite been fully *apart* from his life
Before, and says, says something like
I slapped... A ripping sound... my hands...
And there it is, the last event, the worst.
And there they lie on the table between us: his hands.
Hands of a bad boy, hunting, hurting, shoving off.
And now it seems at last he wants to slap them.
Instead, he puts them in his pocket. A rueful grin.
A shrug. *I was just a kid*, he says, as though
He wants to shrink the story
And fling it over the wall in the dark to the alley,
A bruised, rotten fruit a drunk might find
Who's got no sure place to go but down.
I want him to curl his hands around it.
I want him to shut his eyes, to suck its bitter juices,
To halt this horrifying confession, and then to cry.
That's not my life. That's literature.

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Monsters

A STORY BY KERRY COHEN

Jory had it down to three times a week. A dry, toasted bagel on Monday, cut into eight equal parts. A half banana and an apple on Thursday. And two cups of salted, air-popped popcorn on Saturday. Each second had become the moment when she would or would not be eating one of these foods. Months ago, Richard had told her she was irresistible, her model's legs, her tight stomach. Their last night together, when they were no longer having sex, Richard sat her down on her couch and took her hand. She looked down, saw the puffy flesh of her fingers. She couldn't stand him touching her anymore, not with all this vile weight she had yet to lose.

"What are you doing to yourself?" he had asked. He was twice her age, stubble shadowing his cheeks.

"Don't," Jory had said and tried to pull her hand back, but he tightened his fingers around hers. She turned her head.

"You need help," he said.

She hadn't looked at him, horrified that he saw her as helpless, as the ugly, tarnished person she really was. "Please, just leave," she had said. Later, she sat on the wood floor of her room and carved marks with a knife into her forearm. The blood appeared in sudden, clean lines.

Two days later, on her way home from work, she collapsed. Finally, she thought, as the lightness turned to dizziness and then into darkness. And even as she thought it, she was surprised to find that she had been waiting for anything beyond her life as she knew it. Before, she was waiting only for a deeper hollow in her hipbone, a more direct proportion between thigh and calf. Nothing existed beyond these necessities, this slighting of body.

Now, she has agreed to stay in this hospital in a small upstate New York town, by suggestion and order of the doctor that revived her that day. Here, they told her she would stay until she gained at least twenty pounds. Her heart sped at the thought of twenty pounds of flesh.

"Why didn't you tell me?" her mother says on the phone. Her mother is a pianist, famous on the East Coast, and the impatience in her voice reminds Jory that her practice hours are too precious for such disturbances. Jory is in the white hallway of the hospital, and she speaks softly so her voice won't echo in the corridor.

"Tell you what, Mother?"

"That you were having problems."

"I'm okay," Jory says, though she's not so sure anymore. At first it had been a high, losing almost a pound a day. She had watched her success as if the body were someone else's, an unnecessary layer covering her bones. The numbers on her bathroom scale stayed with her throughout the day. She imagined stamping them out with each step on her morning run, on her forty-block walk to work. Whatever the numbers, there would always be a lower one she could reach. She could always be better, finer.

"Really, you're in a hospital, Jory. I wouldn't call that okay."

"I'm fine."

Her mother sighs. She is far away, in Georgia. "How did this happen, Sweetheart? I don't understand."

"Don't worry about me, Mother."

"Right," her mother says. "Don't worry that my twenty-two year old daughter is wasting away in a hospital like an old woman."

After hanging up, she lies on the bed in her room. The ceiling is a putrid cream. On the other wall is a window. She can see the bright day through the sheer curtains. She can feel its heat on her legs. If she gets up and pulls the curtain aside, she can see, first, her reflection, distorted and unclear. Then she can see the perfect mowed grass below, the three Japanese maples in a row, lavender irises at their base. Beyond that, she can see woods, tangled and thick, and beyond that, maybe a road.

When the nurse comes in, she brings a tray full of food. She introduces herself as Rae. Jory turns her head.

"Come on, Jory." Rae has circles under her eyes and gray hair. Her skin looks like it is two sizes too big. "You have to eat this now."

"It's disgusting." Jory keeps her eyes on Rae.

"It's good, Jory. Now eat up." She sets the tray on Jory's lap.

Jory looks down. Meat. A pile of mashed potatoes. String beans soaked in butter. The food reminds her of her legs, spread wide and flabby below the tray. "I can't eat this," Jory says.

"It's what you ordered, Jory."

"I wouldn't order this." She holds her head away from the food as her throat tightens. Even the odor is greasy.

"Well." The nurse sighs. Her eyes close for a

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moment. "What would you like? It's important that you choose what you eat, but you still have to eat."

"A salad."

"Chef's or Caesar?"

"Lettuce," Jory says. She is aware of the air between them, her bones and the nurse's soft flesh. She can feel the nurse's warmth, the thick, soggy heat of her life.

"You'll have Chef's," the nurse says, "and you still have to eat that roll and butter."

Jory shakes her head. She almost laughs at the ludicrousness. She has not eaten butter in years. It is pure fat.

"I'll be here to make sure you eat it," the nurse says.

Jory touches her hand to her face. She can feel the jaw filling in, like something alive beneath her skin. She pinches hard. If only she could cut it off, slice it with scissors and throw it away. It's not hers, this softness. Her true self is sharp, like the blade of a knife.

Between lunch and dinner, she is allowed to visit a sitting room with two other girls, all three in their thin green hospital smocks. There is one brown couch, a huge TV, a card table and four chairs. Three ancient magazines are arranged on the table: *Reader's Digest, Time,* and *TV Guide.* No one has bothered to replace them for more recent material. Still, they are the first thing the girls grab at, habit from their past lives. They flip through, searching for familiar pictures of what they want and hate the most, bodies and food, the elegant curve of a woman's hand. When Jory is brought in, they look up.

"How much?" the girl introduced as Sandra asks. She is so skinny Jory can see the two bones in her calves. Her arms are like sticks. Her hair is grayish-blond. It is thin enough to show her scalp underneath. Is that what I look like? Jory thinks. She hesitates near the door. She's not sure what Sandra has asked.

"How much do you weigh?" Sandra says. She takes a strand of hair and puts it in her mouth.

Jory glances at the other girl, Hettie. She's not as skinny, but seems smaller with brown hair and wide eyes. She's slumped in the other chair, her arms hugged around her chest. Like Jory, her arms are furry with dark hair. She looks young, in her late teens. No way, Jory thinks, will I say my weight out loud. Her fingers are purple with cold. She thinks she can feel her thighs touching, and she moves her feet apart. She wishes there were no one else in the room. It is big enough, maybe, to jog around.

"You can tell me," Sandra says. "I weigh seventy-three. They're trying to get me up to a hundred pounds. Can you believe it? A hundred pounds." She shakes her head.

A taste of jealousy hits Jory's mouth. Yesterday, before she left her apartment, she was at eighty-two. She would probably never get as low as Sandra. She looks down at her arms and tries to see what Sandra and Hettie must see. "I don't know what I weigh anymore," Jory says. It is true since she had been forced to eat that roll. It makes her dizzy, so she sits on the couch.

"Hettie here weighs eighty-seven. She has to get up to a hundred and ten."

Hettie smiles. Her smile is so weak that barely any of her face moves. The numbers run through Jory's head, and she tries to remember the calories of a roll and a few bites of lettuce. She should have refused to eat it. Guilt rises like nausea.

"How long have you guys been here?" she asks.

"I've been here two months. Hettie's been here one. We're working on life, I guess." Sandra stands and goes to turn the TV on. Her legs move like bending twigs.

"So, what do you want to watch. A cop show, Sally Jesse Raphael, Bugs Bunny? They don't give us cable here."

Hettie sits on the couch next to Jory. Her legs are stiff and awkward, like a pubescent boy's. "Let's watch Sally," she says.

"Your vote?" Sandra says to Jory.

"That's fine." Jory looks back towards the door. There are no windows in the room, and the walls are a dull white. She can't believe she's committed herself to months here, with nothing to do to keep her mind off how fat she'll get. Sometimes at home, when she couldn't sleep, everything outside of her, the fold-out bed, the telephone, the curtains, would blow up like in a fish-eye lens. She would take midnight walks to relieve the pressure, a dangerous act in Manhattan, but not as dangerous as the food in the kitchen. She left yellow Post-it notes on the mirrors before she went outside: *You are a fat pig. You are disgusting.* Sandra and Hettie look so frail they could be broken in two, and she wonders now about what she saw in those mirrors when she came back, the bulging hips and rounded stomach. She doesn't know anymore what's really there.

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Rae comes into her room with the tray.

"Dinner," she says. It sounds like a call to her family. Jory wonders if she has children waiting for their dinner at home. An image of her own mother, waiting silently at the dining room table, flashes in her head. Jory used to prepare all their meals, her mother too distracted by performances. They would eat in silence, Jory careful to follow her mother's concern for manners: small bites, mouth closed, don't finish everything on your plate.

"You can't make me eat this," Jory says. It is spaghetti and meatballs, dripping in sauce. She gave up meat a long time ago. "I asked for no meat or sauce."

"You can't have it without meat and sauce."

"Then I choose not to have it."

"You can't have that either." Rae sits down at the end of the bed. She takes a magazine from her purse. She's no-nonsense tonight, ready to begin. She probably wants to go home to her family, Jory thinks. She probably hates this time with her, counting the minutes so she can leave.

"I can't eat it."

"You have to eat at least half," Rae says. "I'm not leaving until you do."

Jory looks down at the food. She envisions herself throwing the food and running. It would splatter against the wall and all over the floor. Macaroni art. Show that to the hospital's art therapist. She could sprint past security before they announced it on the intercom. Rae flips slowly through the magazine where Jory can glimpse women's faces and legs. She tries to think of where she'd go once she made it past the guards. Her cubicle at the promotions agency where she works. The little room she rents uptown. The store windows she passes by, mannequins gazing out, her ghostly reflection constantly by her side. Nothing else comes to mind. She has spent years moving between these two small areas, the rest of the world tremendous and vague, an ocean floating behind the transparent walls of her life.

Sandra is in the sitting room after lunch. She's watching an exercise show, and since patients aren't allowed to do this type of exercise, she has her legs tucked under on the couch.

"Move it, honey," Sandra says. "Work that off."

Jory sits next to her. She sits on her hands to keep them warm. On TV, the woman's thighs shake when her legs hit the floor.

"She's got to work up a sweat if she wants to lose any of that flab," Sandra says, her eyes fixed on the TV.

"Where's Hettie?"

"Her folks come today." Sandra looks around. Then, raising her arms, she bends her forearms in. Biceps curls. Through the hole of Sandra's gown, Jory glimpses Sandra's rib cage. "You got parents to visit you?"

"She won't be visiting." Instead of visits, which would take too much time, Jory calls her mother every Sunday at six. The last time Jory saw her mother was a year ago. She had come up for a performance in New York. She played for three nights, and afterwards Jory went backstage and sipped white wine with her. They discussed sonatas and the fall of art in this century. Then Jory went home, walking the thirty blocks in the rain.

"My parents said they didn't want to see me until I was healthy," Sandra says. "As if they knew what *healthy* was."

On TV, two little girls are stuffing colored cereal into their mouths. Milk glistens on their lips.

Sandra sucks on a strand of hair. "I have a boyfriend, though."

"He visits you here?" Jory thinks of Richard visiting every Friday night, falling asleep on top of her in that skinny bed, and tiptoeing past security to get home before his wife wakes up.

"Sure," Sandra says. "We do it in the boys' bathroom." Jory laughs. There is a boys' bathroom at the end of the hall. It is meant for visitors and the slight chance of a boy's admittance. The room is cleaned weekly by the janitor, but rarely monitored. Sandra told her that once a girl on the floor had almost died. And, while the nurses were frantic, Sandra had snuck into the boys' bathroom to vomit up her lunch.

"We do. He comes real quick since he only sees me once a month. We're out of there in two minutes, and no one ever knows." Jory imagines Sandra having sex, the skin moving over her ribs like the scales of a snake.

"What if they catch you?"

"What are they going to do?" Sandra says, "Throw me out? Send me to my room without supper?" On TV, the exercise woman is marching in place. She raises her arms above her head in a sweeping motion. Her smile is tremendous.

"Keep those legs moving, girls," the woman says. Jory tightens her buttocks, an involuntary squeeze.

Rae comes in with the tray.

"Rise and shine," she says. "Just look what I've got for you today."

It's eggs and toast, drenched in grease. There's a big glass of pulpy orange juice.

"How come you don't have to eat this shit?" Jory says. Jory stares at the food, her mouth watering, then leans back and sighs.

Rae adjusts the blinds so the sun stripes the room. "I eat in my own home."

Jory watches Rae's back as she pulls on the cord. She tries to imagine what Rae would be wearing at home. "Do you have a family?"

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"Go on and eat." Rae sits down and motions towards the food on Jory's lap.

"Just tell me, Rae," Jory says. "Do you?"

Rae sighs. "Yes, honey. I have a husband and three boys."

Jory imagines Rae serving breakfast in her kitchen. She imagines her kissing the boys on the head, yelling after them not to forget their lunch. She feels a flutter at her throat. Rae motions again at the food.

"I really can't eat, Rae."

"You have to," Rae says, touching Jory's shoulder. Jory tightens her deltoid at the touch.

"I'm getting fat," Jory whispers. Tears swell in her eyes. She blinks hard to push them away.

"No, Jory," Rae says. She sits next to Jory and places a warm arm around her neck. "You're getting healthy."

Jory wipes at her eyes and stares at the lines of light on the floor. She cannot have it both ways. It is like two people tugging at her arms. One, like Rae, tells her she has no choice but to eat if she's going to live. The other is more familiar, small and terrified, and Jory grips her arms around Rae when she hears its words: *Maybe you've never wanted to live.*

Sandra, Hettie and Jory are watching Country Kitchen. The large woman host is making a seafood quiche. She is engulfing chunks of butter with dough.

"This woman should think about not eating so much food," Sandra says.

"It's so fattening," Hettie says. She's only half facing the TV.

"When I get out," Jory says, "I'm going to cook a big meal."

Hettie laughs.

"Really," Jory says, "a real meal. I'm going to make stuffed Cornish game hens and mashed potatoes, and a devil's food cake for dessert." She tries to hide the way her mouth twitches over the words, as if even touching the words would be consuming the calories.

"You are not," Hettie says. She wrinkles her eyebrows in fear.

Jory smiles. She's done it before. Cooked a four-course gourmet meal for Richard and didn't let herself lick a spoon. She loves cooking. She has ever since she was a child. It has exact measurements and equal parts, and she can give it away. It is her most intimate relationship with food. Richard loved her cooking. He had told her that his wife's cooking was awful. Because he wouldn't eat it, she got fat as a cow eating it herself.

The night Jory cooked, one of their last nights, she told him she had eaten, couldn't eat another thing. She watched him bring a perfect sushi to his lips, the plump rice, the salmon and tunafish, tightly wrapped in a brilliant green. They had been arranged in a star on the plate, and slowly he broke into it until there were none left. He ate the sizzling teriyaki chicken, the beautiful steamed vegetables, fluorescent in color, each carrot and pepper exactly one by three inches.

"Not me," Hettie says. "I'm only going to allow vegetables in my house."

"Seems safer just to stay here for the rest of our lives," Sandra says.

Just then a nurse appears at the door. She has a girl as skinny as Sandra by the arm. The girl has dark skin and large somber eyes. Her cheeks are hollow. She looks older than the others.

"This is Theresa," the nurse says. "Try not to bite."

"What do you think?" Sandra says to Theresa after the nurse has left the room. "Is it possible to live on the outside? Do you think any of us will ever be able to live our lives like everyone else?"

"Leave me alone," Theresa says, and she heads straight for the magazines.

"Okay girls," the instructor says, "I want you to reach up as high as you can, and then lean slowly over to touch your toes."

This is Thursday's so-called exercise class. Sandra calls it Anorexercise. Other than Jory, Sandra, Hettie, and Theresa, there are two other girls, both so thin they have to hold onto a dance bar so as not to faint. Jory didn't know you could get that thin and live.

"On your way down," the instructor says, "I want you to let go of all your hurt and anger. Let it fall right down through the floor."

Sandra snorts. The two thin girls are holding tight to the bar. They can't pull themselves back up without sitting down first.

Next, the instructor puts on Stravinsky, a composer Jory recognizes from when she was a girl. Her mother used to play Stravinsky, her face pained and far away, her fingers caressing the keys. Jory used to watch from the doorway, her heart at her throat. Once, in an hour of carelessness on Jory's tenth birthday, her mother had danced for her across that room, leaping and twirling and laughing. Now, the instructor wants them to dance to the music. "Let your body go whichever way it wants to," she says. Then she stands back and smiles for them to begin.

Jory sways, then stands on her toes. She raises her arms up and then waves them in circles. She pulls her body down, crouching on the floor, her eyes shut and her arms waving at her sides. When the music stops, she is exhausted. It takes all she has just to stand back up, slowly, her head rolling up last so the blood won't escape. And just for that moment, it is as if she has appeased that small part of her that she heard so clearly the other morning with Rae. It is as if this is the part that has been dancing to the music, finally unbound,

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finally eager to be alive. She opens her eyes and sees the instructor near the door. She sees Sandra and Hettie and Theresa and the two thin girls. She sees the creamy ceiling and the dirt-brown carpeted floor. Who, she thinks, is this person living inside my skin?

Fridays, they sit outside in plastic-ribbed lawn chairs, facing the yard. A nurse sits behind them, near the door. The lawn is immaculate, cut short and even. It is shocking green in the sun. The grass goes on and on, and Jory aches to stand up and run it, not just for exercise, but to feel that freedom, the wind rushing, her legs wild over the ground. They are all smoking, allowed only during this time outside and only under supervision. They bring the skinny cigarettes to their mouths again and again. They pass them back and forth to light new ones off the diminishing butts, as if they were sacred pipes.

"The leaves are turning," Sandra says, staring out at the maples. In the sunlight, her skin is almost gray. She has not been gaining weight, and it almost seems that she is getting smaller. She sucks from her cigarette, her cheeks hollowing. The nurses have been discussing her in low voices all week. She is tricking them somehow.

"Remember playing in leaf piles when you were young?" Hettie says. She smokes without inhaling, the white smoke billowing from her mouth. Jory turns away. As a child, Jory watched from the window as men in gray worksuits raked up the dead leaves and trucked them away. There would never have been time to play in leaves back them. She had too many responsibilities, preparing meals, vacuuming, watering the plants.

"There were no trees where I grew up," Theresa says. She looks past the lawn and through the woods, as if seeing the place she lived. "We had buildings and concrete and trash. That's it."

"How sad," Hettie says, watching her.

"It's not sad," Sandra says. "It's her life. It's what she came from." She blows her smoke out in a long, straight line.

Theresa looks at her lap a moment, then stares out at the woods again. "I wouldn't ever want to go back," she says.

"You can't live here forever," Jory says. She imagines going back to her apartment, to the battered fold-out couch, the yellow kitchen, the card table she bought for two bucks at Goodwill. She has an image of herself at that table, reading the newspaper and eating toast. It seems so easy right then, a simple decision. Sandra is watching her with wide eyes, as if she has never considered that she couldn't stay in the hospital for the rest of her days.

On Sundays, they have the option of going to church. It is a small, neighborhood Baptist church that has a little tunnel connecting the hospital. The church agreed years ago to build this tunnel that would allow the patients into their hearts and into the house of God.

"God wouldn't live in a house with wood paneling," Sandra whispers when they walk in. Theresa has convinced the three friends to go this Sunday. To be inside different walls. They go in their hospital gowns and robes. The sermon has already started, and they slide silently into the last pew. No one hears them come in. The windows are stained glass. One is the Virgin Mary, her head bowed to her baby. The other is an emaciated Jesus on the cross. The sunlight strains through the bright colors. Jory thinks of how her mother would be appalled to know she was at a service. Her mother thinks church is bourgeois. "The Lord Jesus sacrificed so that we may be saved," the preacher is saying. "And still we lose ourselves to greed. He lay his heart in his hands, and still we move farther and farther from his hopes."

Afterwards, they sit, taking advantage of their time outside the hospital, and wait for the townspeople to leave. They stare back at the girls with pity, poking each other, and smiling sadly. A fat woman dressed in burgundy leans down before passing their bench.

"Little angels," the woman says softly, tears in her eyes. Jory looks away, humiliated. She wishes they hadn't brought themselves into public view. Theresa is squeezing her inner thighs, the hollow skin pressed between her fingers. Sandra's hair has begun to fall out. Hettie holds her arms around herself and looks at the floor. We are freaks, Jory thinks, avoiding the people's eyes. And as soon as the church has emptied, Jory heads for the doorway that leads back to the hospital. The others follow, Hettie helping Sandra. For the first time since Jory can remember, she feels anger pushing up from her stomach and into her throat. She is twenty-two years old and yet she can say nothing of her life. Only that she is a monster, unable to live in the world.

The next week is Sandra's birthday, and the nurses bring in party hats, noise makers, balloons, and a cake. They decorate the sitting room with pink and purple streamers. She is twenty-five today, a quarter of a century old. She looks thinner than ever, a skeleton covered by skin. The nurses, all with polka-dotted hats strapped to their heads, help Sandra to the couch. Then they place a paper crown on her head with "The Birthday Queen" written in silver letters across the front. She sits quietly, her hands in her lap until Hettie urges her to unwrap the nurses' presents. She receives a scarf and mittens, a pair of rose-tinted sunglasses, a silver pen and pencil set. She thanks them, holding the gifts in her lap. The girls sit on either side of her and watch. Then they sing Happy Birthday and the nurses bring the lighted cake. Wax runs down the sides of the

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skinny, braided candles. Sandra closes her eyes and blows. Only two of the flames go out. The nurses clap and blow out the rest. Then they put the cake away. They know that no one will eat it.

Theresa wraps the scarf around Sandra's neck. She puts the mittens on her hands and the sunglasses over Sandra's eyes. Jory and Hettie stand near the arm of the couch. Theresa is the only one who seems to know what to do.

At the end of two months, Jory calls her mother again.

"Anything better there?" she says.

Jory can hear rain echoing outside. It comes down in loud, fat drops. "I suppose," Jory says. "I'm getting healthy again."

"Good for you."

Jory leans against the phone and stares down the empty corridor. She hates when her mother makes her feel like a baby. She looks down at her bitten nails. "How have the performances been?"

"The same. No one's interested in high art anymore. It's gone out of style. When are you getting out, dear?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe I could talk to someone."

"No, Mother." Jory closed her eyes. "I don't want to go back yet."

"Don't be absurd."

"I'm scared."

"What are you talking about?" her mother says. "You're my strong girl. You could do anything you'd like."

Jory takes a long breath. "That's what I'm afraid of, Mother."

"Jory," her mother begins, but this is all she says.

In the middle of the night, there is an emergency. Jory wakes to the yells of the night nurse, and then the bustle of machinery in the hall. She gets up, wrapping the thin robe around her body, and walks into the hall. The linoleum is icy on her feet. The commotion is in Sandra's room, and Jory goes there, her heart beating too fast. She already knows what she will find, but prays anyway for something else. From Sandra's doorway, Jory watches them pump Sandra's heart, the IVs flying like tentacles from her body. Amidst the chaos, Sandra's face is terribly pale and serene, and she almost looks pleased. Hettie and Theresa stand in the hallway. Theresa is crying, her hands covering her face. Hettie puts her arm around Theresa and, though her eyes are wide, she whispers comforting words: "It will be okay," she says, "everything will be okay."

Afterwards, when they have removed the body and sent everyone back to bed, Jory stares out her window and watches the night. She wonders about the feel of the cool air outside. She has been gaining weight, she knows, and though part of her recognizes that this is healthy, she can not understand this weight as her own. She feels lost inside herself, masked beneath rivers of flesh. Maybe, she thinks, Sandra is better off. There is no peace for them. Even now that she is getting better, Jory still feels the fight inside. No one, not Sandra, not herself, could ever feel solace in the lonely worlds that they carved out for themselves so long ago.

Rae comes in with the tray. Her eyes sit above gray circles, and she touches Jory's arm.

"How are you?" Rae asks. She sets the tray beside her bed, understanding that Jory will not be able to face food at this moment.

"Will there be a funeral?" Jory asks.

"That's up to her parents," Rae says. "They had her shipped to Pennsylvania."

Jory gets up. Her strength has begun to return, her body filling out over the bones. She's made a point of not looking, of numbing herself to the way her skin touches itself, a constant pressure. She looks outside past the curtains. The sun is white and strong. The sharp voices of birds cut through the air. From far away, she can hear the roar of cars, the passing of other lives somewhere out of sight.

"What will I do when I get out of here?" she says.

"You'll live," Rae says. "You'll grow stronger and you'll live your life."

"I don't know," Jory says. "I'll have to find a new job. Start all over."

"We'll all still be here for you," Rae says. "We have workshops, people you can talk to." She walks to Jory and touches her on the shoulder. "Come and eat," she says, and though it seems impossible, Jory does.

Theresa is the only one in the sitting room. Hettie is out with her folks. Theresa's skin is beginning to fill out. Jory sits next to her on the couch, and close up she can see large green bruises on the inside of Theresa's thighs. She has been pinching herself again, an old habit. Even in recovery, in the slow softening of lines between herself and the world, she is still struggling with the hunger, the unmeasured hurt. She is watching a sitcom where two men are dressed as women. They look ugly and obvious, but two other men are trying to kiss them. The men in dresses pull back in disgust and the audience laughs long and hard. Theresa is biting on a nail. Finally, she turns to Jory. She takes in a deep breath and then lets it carefully out.

"What do I look like?" she whispers.

Jory thinks hard. It is such a simple question. The most important question in the world. "I don't know," Jory says. She puts her bony fingers on top of Theresa's, and they hold hands for awhile, as if they could anchor each other, prevent one another's disappearance □

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REGINA WILKINS

PAVLOV'S DOGS

The horn sounds and I'm off,
rosary and camera in hand, picnic
basket in the back seat. I'm racing
the pack to Conyers, Georgia
for a glimpse of the Virgin
Mary's monthly visit. We'll follow the signs
that say "Pilgrims This Way" and wait
outside the farmhouse for reports
to come over the PA system. Of course
if Houdini were alive I'd say this is
just another illusion he cooked up
for thrills. After his mother's death
he went to seances to find her
as if he wanted to be betrayed by reality.
I guess it's all in what kind of nail
you hang your hat on. In 1889, the Sioux
invented the ghost dance which they thought
would give them sight of the afterlife.
Joan of Arc claimed to see lights
when the voices of angels spoke to her.
Even Custer saw death with absolute
clarity—he was found with a single
bullet hole in the temple. Today,
you and I continue to look for love
in words we make and destroy as we do
each other. Maybe Wild Bill Hickok
saw death with Custer's clarity. He always
sat with his back to the wall when
playing poker until the day he ignored
this ritual and was shot in the back
of the head. Which is why after seeing
the Polaroids of a woman's white
silhouette a man hangs his rosary on
a crucifix and prays. And why Joan
screamed for Jesus as the flames
closed in. And why we tell stories
to each other in songs, poems about
knights and damsels, cowboys and
Indians, to feel in each other the love
we hold to in words. Meanwhile,
in Maribor, the monastery bells chime
and the monks begin their chants.
Last night, at the West Memphis dog track,
another dog finally caught the foam
rabbit only to be electrocuted. On a
reservation in Montana an old man squints
at the light on the horizon, maybe
a tourist bus, maybe an angel with black hair
and a lovely voice. Here, you and I have
broken the door locks and sunk our teeth
into the wooden handles, clappers
banging wildly, running breathless
with the music of our hunger.

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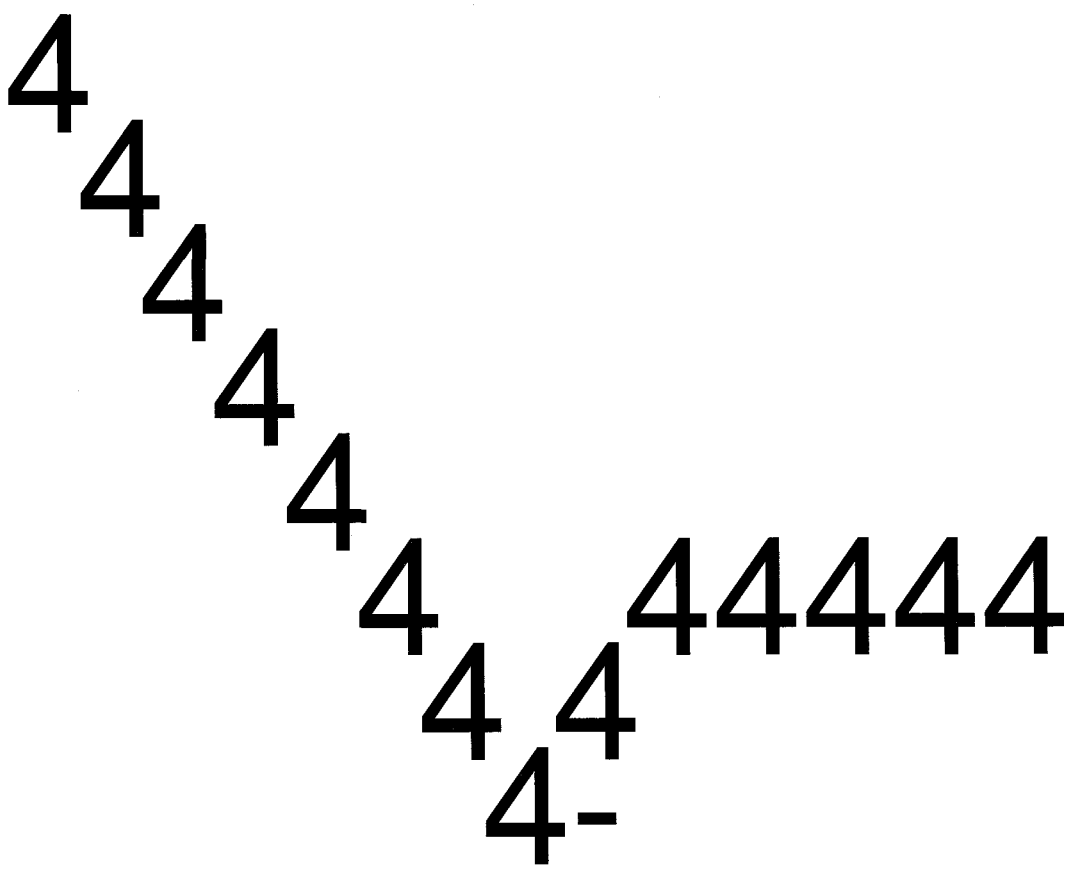

minute fictions 4-ever

Pamela Painter / Heather Quarles
Eugene Stein / Jacob Weinstein
Elizabeth Gallu / Adrian Korpel

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The Kiss

PAMELA PAINTER

No one can guess so she finally tells us. Actually Mona doesn't tell, she shows us by sticking her tongue out and there it is—a gold ball the size of a small pea, sitting in the creased rose lap of her extended tongue.

We all lean forward from our pillows on the floor, seven of us, the wrung-out remnants of a grad party in the low-candle stage. Inge asks Mona where she got it done (Cambridge as an undergrad), Raphi our host asks her why (she likes something in her mouth), my boyfriend wants to know what it tastes like (no taste). We're still peering into her mouth so she lifts her tongue slowly, the rosy tip pointing up toward her nose, and there on the glistening downward slope is another gold ball.

"A bah-bell," she says, her tongue still showing off.

And it is. A tiny gold barbell piercing her tongue.

We settle back into our pillows and she closes her mouth.

My boyfriend, a chef at Valentino's, is probably wondering which tastebuds sit in the middle of the tongue and if they are affected and how. Inge, the etymologist, is mouthing the word tongue, no doubt marveling at how the tongue loves to say that word. I can tell we're all wondering something. Our tongues feel heavy in our mouths, empty except for the privileged gold fillings and ivory bondings of the middle class.

It occurs to me that Mona's not able to enjoy her barbell. Enjoy the way the tip of my tongue visits a rough molar, soothes a canker sore moistly healing on its own, or wetly licks the hairy friction of chapped lips.

I say, I wonder what it's like to kiss her?

Everyone shifts and nods as if they were wondering the exact same thing. We turn to the man Mona came with who shrugs and says he doesn't know. They just met three hours ago at Huddle's Pub.

Well, who's going to kiss her? Inge says.

We all look first to the man she came with and then at the other eligible male. No one counts mine, which disappoints him and he lets it show. The man she came with weighs thirteenth-century Inca bones after reducing them to ashes in an autoclave the size of a toaster. Raphi, our host, is a religion major—the Hellenistic culture—who thinks the world is fast approaching a non-religious end. "I'll kiss her," he offers, then defers to the man she came with.

"Wait a minute. Maybe not," Jorie says, holding up her hand. She's in gender studies with me. "Don't you think we should run it by Mona first?"

We all turn belatedly to Mona.

"Oh," she says, "it's all right with me." The gold ball doesn't show when she talks. I wonder if it makes a dent in the roof of her mouth.

The man she came with says, "I'll kiss her." Neither man is looking at Mona.

"You choose," Inge says to Mona.

Mona shrugs and points to Raphi. "You offered first."

He grins.

Oddly, in perfect synch, they both stand up.

"No, do it here," we all say, "here in front of us." But we needn't have worried; they had no intention of leaving.

Mona and Raphi face each other above us. They are the same height. Mona's hands rest on the hips of her black jeans, her elbows jut out claiming space to equal Raphi's greater weight. He has his hands deep in his pockets. We are all aware of his hands in his pockets.

They stand inches apart—two inches apart. She tilts toward him first, just her shoulders and head, and then he catches her tilt, catches her mouth with his mouth. They kiss. They kiss tenderly and well for two people who have just met. Their heads glide with their mouths and their shoulders move ever so slightly. I imagine his tongue filling her mouth, sliding toward the ball, searching, pressing, perhaps turning it, rolling it; her tongue letting him. I imagine their hands aching to touch the other person but refraining as if to abide by some set of rules.

No one looks away.

Minutes, but probably seconds, later they stop. "It's pretty far back," Raphi says and we all swallow with him.

Mona turns and sticks out her tongue to show us she thinks not, and we see it's not so far, really. Perhaps an inch and a half.

She turns back to Raphi and they kiss again and we all watch them kiss, even better the second time: harder, deeper, her tongue and his tongue, her generously letting him, that slight tilt, their scrupulous hands.

They pull away. We have all been holding our breath.

Well?

They settle themselves cross-legged and facing each other. I imagine another night such as this for them, moving away from the kiss toward the questions and answers of getting to know someone, and that moment when they invite their hands to join their kiss.

We listen as Raphi describes to Mona the amazingly hard muscle of her tongue, the cool surprise of the tiny gold ball, the flick past the ball underneath. They tilt toward each other.

Raphi's hands talk.

Mona is smiling that smile. She's got what she wanted.

The man she came with leaves first.

My boyfriend leaves with me, but we go home separately. We all go home with something missing on our tongue. □

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HEATHER QUARLES

A Case for Sterner Prison Sentencing and Reflections on a Personal Tragedy

by Bear

My therapist says it's useless to dwell on what might have been, but I can't help wondering how our story might have turned out different if the cottage had had a decent security system—a burglar alarm, or at least some functional locks on the doors. Or for that matter if Goldilocks had never broken into our house at all—if we'd never laid eyes on those corkscrew curls, the pasty little face, or that dress with the sappy blue pinafore. What would our lives be today if she hadn't violated our home six years ago bringing everything, as they say in therapy, to "crisis"?

I remember that fateful morning as if it were yesterday. We'd been out gathering berries—Papa Bear, Mama Bear, and I—and had returned to find the cottage door standing open. I told my mom "don't go in" but she didn't listen; she had a can of Mace in her apron and felt she could handle the situation. (They didn't put that in the article, those damn reporters. They made it sound like we just stumbled in unarmed, like morons, and went around gawking at all the broken furniture—you know, "Someone's been eating my porridge," "someone's been eating *my* porridge," "someone's broken my chair" etc., etc.—until we came face to face with Goldilocks herself in the bedroom.) The truth is we were very cautious, although in retrospect we should have dialed 911 and waited for the police to arrive before we entered the building.

Immediately after Goldilocks was apprehended and word got out to the media, we got swamped with calls—especially me because it was my stuff that was damaged. I still remember the throngs of reporters, the flashbulbs, the questions, "Baby Bear, how does it feel to have your chair broken, your breakfast tampered with, your bed slept in by a complete stranger, a criminal off the street? How did you feel that first moment when you realized your porridge was missing?"

Dad and Mom managed to stay in the background at first. Papa Bear was distant in those days anyway. I guess if I hadn't been so young and stupid I would have seen the signs of marital instability—his mysterious bouts with chronic hibernation, the fact that as long as I can remember, he and Mama Bear slept in separate beds. Looking back, of course I can see how dysfunctional our cottage was, but then I was blind to it all. It took me completely by suprise when six months after the break-in he left with some dancing-bear bimbo who'd escaped from a Grateful Dead concert. They migrated to Hollywood and we've only heard from Dad once since then—a postcard bragging that he got a contract with Disney for the Grizzly scene in "Wilderness Family, part four." No child support check enclosed, nothing.

Then there was Mom, poor Momma Bear. I think the whole thing hit her the hardest. She didn't have much of a life in those days, see—that modest hut in the forest her whole world. Her self-esteem was rooted there and our daily routines gave her a sense of empowerment. When Goldilocks came along, all that was shattered. The house was in disarray, breakfast shot to hell, the neighbors scandalized. She's never been the same since, and it's merely salt in her wound to know that Goldilocks is now up for parole.

According to the lawyers, she'll be free in less than a month. She's already scheduled appearances on three different TV shows: Jenny Jones, 20/20, and A Current Affair. And to top it off, I've just been informed that the weasely reporter who broke this story has sold the rights to Little Golden Books. We'll never live down the publicity—he's ruined our lives, this no-name, this hack. Calls himself the Narrator. What an asshole.

I've relived it a million times in therapy, but I still want to puke remembering the look on that kid's face when we walked in on her in my bed. *My* bed. She sat up with her hair all tousled and gave us this innocent victim look, a child seeking refuge from the dark forest, and it worked. It stopped Mama Bear in her tracks; she put that Mace right back in her apron. (I know she's since wished she'd blinded the little delinquent.) It worked on the media too, and the jury, and the judge. Goldilocks ended up with half the prison sentence she deserved. And now, in one month, she'll be at large.

My therapist keeps saying, "Bitterness helps no one. It's merely a destructive emotion," but lately I am forming my own views on the subject. Between counseling sessions, I've been doing a lot of reading: "Grizzlies in America," "Sudden Attack!" "The Yellowstone Massacre." None of this "Winnie the Pooh" shit, I'm getting back to my roots and discovering what teeth and claws are for. I'll tell you one thing: Goldilocks had better watch her back □

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EUGENE STEIN

Mom's Diner

At Mom's Diner, you tip because you want to, not because you have to. At Mom's Diner, smokers are infallibly courteous to non-smokers. At Mom's Diner, Shorty the cook always makes a really good rice pudding.

Mom's Diner is right off Allen Ginsberg Boulevard, where Gene Debs Street crosses Charles Fourier Avenue. Betty, the waitress, works hard, but manages to put money aside each week for her son's college fund. Betty swears she's going to lose ten pounds, and curses her hair for turning gray faster than she can rinse it, but she's quick with a joke for the customers, and always has a positive outlook on life. She's done wonders raising Buddy Junior by herself, ever since the tornado took Buddy Senior.

That's her son over there—the busboy with dirty blonde hair and sparkling blue eyes. Clearing the tables, grinning at the customers, or baby-sitting Shorty's daughter in the basement, Buddy always has a positive outlook on life. What a charming young man: seventeen, handsome, with a slight gap in his teeth that makes his smile look a bit mischievous. And he does enjoy pulling pranks on young children.

Buddy works at the restaurant in between school, band practice, and football. You should see him at football games: he slips out of his shoulder pads at half time, puts on a band uniform, grabs his trombone, and joins the brass section for a swinging version of "The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia." No one knows about his hearing loss, suffered in an obscure boating accident; he reads lips in the huddle. (By the way, what was he really doing with little Stevie Woodmere on Cather Island? Did they find the buried treasure? Was the ghost no ghost at all, but rather Mr. Parkinson dressed in a sheet, trying to scare off any thrill-seekers and protect his valuable uranium deposits?)

Then, too, no one knows about Buddy's private tragedy: not his father's death, or rather not only; no, we're speaking of his blind desires, his passion for suspense and deceit, his sense of the mysterious past forever receding. Shhh.

Oh, now he's flirting nervously with Sally, the pretty sixteen-year-old at the counter—the one who's drinking a cherry cola through a straw. With her straight red hair, her puppy-dog brown eyes, and her freckles, she looks so provocative and yet so girl-next-doorish. Sigh. She doesn't even know she's pretty! Sally wants to be a veterinarian, because she loves animals so much. It's very hard to be a veterinarian, she realizes; you need good grades, so she studies very hard. But with her positive outlook on life, and her flair for calculus, physics, organic chemistry, anatomy, and animal husbandry, she's a shoo-in, don't you think?

At Mom's Diner, gays are allowed to serve in the military.

Sally leaves, but look who's coming in: two regulars, Larraine and Nikolai. Larraine is an African-American woman, proud, well-spoken, but somewhat brittle. She'd rather not talk about her past, Betty has noticed. Larraine works as a teller in the bank down the street. The vice-president wouldn't know what to do without her, and in fact, she taught him his job. Larraine and Shorty have a combative relationship, and constantly skewer each other with jibes that display their brilliant comic timing. She insults his cooking. He insults her race, but with a wink that lets us all know he doesn't mean it.

Nikolai is an immigrant from Russia. He works twelve hours a day slaughtering chickens in a filthy abattoir. He drinks too much, is accident prone, and has already chopped a finger off with a meat cleaver, but his mangled English is a constant source of amusement to the patrons of Mom's Diner. Larraine and Nikolai don't have many friends in town, but with their positive outlooks on life, they're sure to fit in eventually.

Now who's this entering the diner? He doesn't look familiar. His eyes are glassy, his hair is greasy. He says his name is Dwight, and he takes out a gun. His arm is trembling. He wants all the cash. Shorty says everyone should stay calm, and he sends Buddy and his daughter Samantha down to the basement. Then Shorty takes out his own gun. "Go ahead," Shorty says. "You can shoot first." But Dwight can't do it. He drops his gun and collapses onto one of the stools at the counter.

Dwight confides that he needs a kidney transplant. The glassy eyes are a result of a chemical imbalance. A lack of proper grooming explains the greasy hair. Kidney transplants and hair brushes are expensive, so what else can he do?

First of all, Betty notes, he needs a positive outlook on life. He can start working at Mom's Diner to make some extra cash—Buddy's leaving for college in the fall, anyway.

And they'll all chip in for the transplant.

Then Larraine admits, shyly, that she has an extra kidney. That's right, she has three. Betty is sure Larraine and Dwight will be genetically compatible. The necessary arrangements are made. This exchange of body parts, crossing racial lines, moves everyone, even Shorty. Shorty volunteers to give the kid a shampoo, but his offhandedness doesn't fool anybody. Deep down, Shorty's a softy.

Samantha comes running up from the basement, crying hysterically. Buddy follows her into the diner. She seems fearful of Buddy. But Buddy explains that to distract Samantha, he pretended his hand was a mouse, and then crawled up her dress. Everybody has a good laugh, including Dwight, who now has a positive outlook on life. Shorty puts away his gun. Somehow it's the next morning, and he starts frying some eggs and preparing a huge batch of pancakes. No one worries about cholesterol.

By the way, Shorty's revolver is registered with the local police department, because Mom's Diner has really strict handgun control laws. □

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JACOB WEINSTEIN

The Polysyllabi

Tara's parents do not hear her speak for the first three years of her life, and they worry that she is retarded. What they do not know is that, lying in her crib while everyone else sleeps, she practices muttering the short easy words that most babies say: "Mama. Bottle. Dada." She is ashamed to say them in public, because they are so simple, so inelegant. One morning, though, her parents are watching a National Geographic special on Hawaii, and the commentator makes the distinction between "aa" (sharp, crumbling lava) and "pahoehoe" (lava that has cooled in smoother, rope-like forms.) The camera cuts to a mass of jagged lava, and Tara yells, "Aa!" The camera glides over a field of smooth lava, and she giggles, "Pahoehoe!"

From that moment on, she devotes her life to extravagant words. She haunts Webster's and the OED. In high school, she finds out that quilting is also called "interbastation," and she begins making an Afghan. When she discovers that there is a word for postcard collecting, and that the word is "deltiology," she haunts the flea markets for the four-inch by six-inch squares of paper. She refuses to buy ones that haven't been written on. She goes to St. Louis University, because its mascot is the Billiken, a round-faced doll popular during the first part of the century. When she graduates, she sells perfumes door to door. Her parents feel she is not living up to her potential, but she is content, because she knows that the name for her job is myropologia.

One day, in *The New York Times*, she sees an article on opisthoporeia, an illness in which the sufferer walks backward uncontrollably. She decides to try it out during her lunch break She succeeds for several yards, despite the busyness of the city sidewalk, until she runs into a man, who is also walking backwards. He looks at her, and says, "Opisthoporeia?"

She nods, and points to the bundle of postcards that he dropped during their collision. She says, "Deltiology?" He nods.

Two weeks later, they are married.

His name is Ronnie, and she is delighted to discover that it is not short for "Ronald"; in fact, his given name is, simply, "Ron," and "E" is the initial of his last name. Their marriage is interoscular, marked by frequent kissing. They sit home evenings, going over their postcard collection, discussing engastration and grapholagnia. When they feel kinky, they adorn themselves with genuglyphics, erotic knee decorations.

The years go by. They learn to live with each other's eccentricities. Tara is linonophobic, and in deference to her pathological fear of string, Ronnie wears nothing with laces. Even his formal shoes close with Velcro. Ronnie, for his part, is nyctitropic, a quality found normally only in plants, and he often wakes Tara when he performs the night-time shifting associated with that condition. When this happens, she kisses him on the neck, and goes back to sleep.

But one night, as he turns nyctitropicly, she hears him murmur, "Oh, bathukolpian." A bathukolpian woman, as any schoolchild knows, is a deep-bosomed one, and Tara is a size 32AA. Tears in her eyes, she shakes him awake.

"Who is it?" she asks. "Who do you know that's bathukolpian?" She knows her reaction is irrational, that words uttered in sleep are generally deblateration, syllabub, words as frothy and meaningless as whipped cream, but she cannot help it. And when he reacts defensively, sharply, she knows her instincts were correct.

"It's nothing, a nullity, a bagatelle, syllabub," he snaps.

"You're a lousy liar, and that's pure catachresis," she yells, meaning that he is misusing his vocabulary. "How can it be simultaneously a nullity and a bagatelle?"

"Fine," he yells back, turning red in the face. "Fine! Rounceval! Rounceval!"

She does not understand him. "Rounceval" comes from Roncesvalles, a mountain pass in northern Spain famed for the gigantic bones displayed there as the remains of Charlemagne's paladins. As an adjective, therefore, "rounceval" means "big," and so he may be admitting to the size of what is at stake—or merely describing his bathukolpian lover. But "rounceval," as a noun, means a big woman, and, metaphorically, a harridan, a shrew, a nagging, shrill woman, and so he may be hurling an insult at her. Then it occurs to her that "rounceval" can also mean any one of a species of peas that bear large seeds, and, while she knows he can not possibly mean it in that sense, the thought of it is enough to send her into a fit of giggles. She tries to control herself, but. although she is furious, she cannot stop laughing, and her whole body shakes as if with mirth. He stands there, growing progressively redder, wordlessly. □

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ELIZABETH GALLU

Best Intentions

I was supposed to marry Paul McCartney. When he got married to Linda, I was supposed to marry Marvin Gaye, but he died and then I was supposed to marry Neil Young.

I was supposed to live in a house on a hill with a view of the Sangre de Cristo mountains and a white kitchen. I was supposed to be five foot six, and speak French fluently.

I was supposed to laugh like Lauren Bacall, husky and deep-chested, and kiss people on both cheeks. I was supposed to wear topaz.

I was supposed to live before I died.

All this I thought, and more, as I lay at the base of the ravine. Night owls hooted, and I was vaguely aware of the scent of eucalyptus. Warm blood trickled down my chin. It happened so fast. A turn of the wheel. A falling in slow motion, down, down, until finally I could feel my teeth biting clear through my lower lip, and then a thud and a propulsion up and out into the warm, dry summer dark.

I was supposed to wear clean underwear for a moment like this. And I was. It was pink, from the lingerie department at Bullock's Westwood. I was supposed to have traveled to Thailand, and gone from rich to poor, and back to rich again. I was supposed to have had just one manicure, and gone to Calcutta to work with Mother Teresa. To do some good. Why had the manicure seemed so important?

Off in the distance I heard rustling sounds. Small animals beneath scattered leaves and underbrush. All around, the world was changing. The Berlin wall was down; blacks were casting votes in Soweto. It was nine a.m. in Paris and a pair of lovers poured steaming espresso into gold-edged demitasse cups. Somewhere, someone named Mabel wished her name was Mary Ann; and deep sea divers combed the liquid underworld for coral. Beautiful, pale coral, like my earrings. The ones that sat in a box on the dresser. The ones I never wear.

I lay still, unable to move, and listened to the world. When the world got too loud, I listened some more to the stirrings of the night, those rustlings, knowing one thing only, that this time was bound to come. It's just that I hadn't expected it, because I was supposed to move from here to there, to fix right what was wrong.

I was supposed to say "Om Shanti," without a tinge of self-consciousness. I was supposed to be everybody's equal, to call important strangers for favors and not apologize. I was supposed to buy turquoise in far off places.

The day before, I'd worried. I'd worried about this. I'd worried about that. I bought Liquid Drano for a stopped-up sink and worried it would splash out and into my eye. I worried about the price per pound of portobello mushrooms, and the fat content in avocados. I worried about unemployment and the number of gun fatalities in the District of Columbia. I spent the day restless, wishing the fog would lift and the sun would beat against my skin warming me from outside in. The newscasters gave us some bad news, and the skim milk turned sour. I worried about these things, too.

When the car went down I didn't worry at all. Not that I can remember, anyway. At least not the kind of nagging worry that usually followed me from one occasion to the next. The dark worried me some, but maybe not seeing was a good thing. Not seeing how metal twisted, and how my white cotton dress from Cornell Trading was

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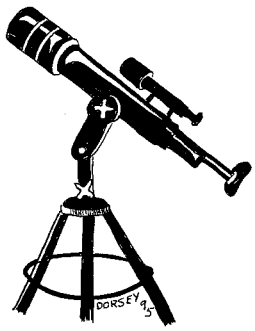
torn up one side and down the other, was not so bad. Moonlight illuminated some of it. And I could guess.

I guess I guessed wrong about some things, though. About how I was supposed to sing ballads at the Blue Note, and join the Peace Corps, all at the same time.

I was supposed to drive with the top down and my hair flying from San Francisco to Carmel. I was supposed to plant dogwood and watch it flower from one year to the next. I was even supposed to do what it is I do best. What was that?

Sometimes there's no accounting for the way things turn out. I mean, it's a crazy world. And I really believe that because I've seen proof—like when computers call me on the phone and ask me to hold for an important call; or when a mother of two sets up house and home in a cardboard box beneath the Dallas freeway; or when bachelor number one outshines bachelor number three. I have seen those pictures. I have heard those lines. I have hung up on a voiceless voice.

Once upon a time I was supposed to be anything. This is when I was just a ball of light. But that changed suddenly when I pushed my way out from inside the warm, spongy wetness I'd come to know as home, and someone slapped the breath right out of me from bottom up. It was then I got confused. Maybe I just forgot. It was so hard.



It was hard after that too, because not only was I supposed to be good at team sports, I was supposed to like them. I was supposed to memorize at least one poem and travel from Spain to Greece, then back again, where I would suck on salty olives and fall asleep against white sheets flapped dry in hot, sea-dipped winds. I was supposed to love my neighbor. My brother. My sister. I was supposed to pay my bills on time so the bank would like me, and buy a Cuisinart when the price went down.

I was supposed to be an angel with a wingspan that wrapped around the state of Wyoming. I was supposed to come back from this place on the ground, with all its night noises and scents of cactus flower and honeysuckle, and say "I love you."

I had the very best intentions. □

ADRIAN KORPEL

SAILING ALONE

One day Grassy Lake got too small for me , and I decided to sail around the world. For a while I pumped gas at night—in my day job I am an accountant—and then bought a thirty foot ketch with a mizzenmast and a poop deck. I replaced the jib by a Genoa, ran all the sheets aft and installed a new bilge pump. After dropping the kids off at Edna's, I was ready to sail, God willing.

I had decided not to take the clipper route, but sail West with the trade winds, and on a sunny Thursday I set out for Hawaii. It took much longer to get there then I had calculated. To pass the time I read my Bible and played my accordion, but it was difficult to find the right chords and hear the psalms, what with the boat rolling and the wind whistling through the rigging.

In Hawaii I bought new general provisions and also procured a new Bible, as the old one was waterlogged. I then set sail for the Marquesas, and made landfall after seven weeks of steady wind, interspersed with squalls. The natives were very friendly, apart from a man at the Quicktrip who gave me a bad time about my skin color.

After leaving the Marquesas I ran into the doldrums and was in irons for a long time. The sun beat down on the poop deck while I sucked water from my handkerchief. After a while I lost consciousness, and when I came to it was dark night. I prayed to my God, and eventually reached Australia.

In Australia I visited the zoo, and saw my first koala. I then found some good Christian people on the beach to help me re-step my mast. When all the sheets were snugged and the stays secured, I set course for South Africa.

The Indian Ocean was terrifying. The swells were very long and many a time the water came up to the gunwales. I constantly had to trim the Genoa and reef the mainsail. Once the squalls were so bad that I had to lash myself to the rudder. But fortunately I outran the typhoons which are prevalent in that region. On Christmas Eve I reached the Cape of Good Hope which I rounded with good cheer, giving thanks to my Maker.

The rest of the trip was uneventful. Crossing the Atlantic I turned into the Panama canal which was very expensive, but they let me use my credit card. On Groundhog Day I finally sailed into Nevada Beach harbor where I kissed my native soil. I then collected the kids at Edna's. They had grown a lot in those two years, and were very proud of their mother. □

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GRETCHEN MATTOX

Demane and Demanzana

Demazana, Demazana, Child of my mother, Open this cave to me.
The swallows can enter it. It has two openings.

—African Folktale

i.
Swallows came and left
synonymous with leaves in wind.
Sister, I know you hungered
and were asked to take too much blame.
The cave you brought on yourself
like being inside a body all over again.
Abiding moon or not, we were parentless.
You cooked buffalo meat on the fire
and fat spit back in accusations.
It was hard to tell who to trust.
Light exonerated you through two air holes.
So you let him in. Metaphor of sexual deflowering.
Silly girl. He'll be a tree stuffed with bees soon enough.
I made my strength from your poor choices;
the price of rebellion was a life.
The sky is a loud blue.
A bee sits on your elbow. Let me flick it off.

ii.
Excess honey licked from the finger,
a lie built to confine desire. How unfair to watch
a compilation of powers expressed in you
and be denied them, swarm of bees in the shape of a man

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running down a road, too much contention, too much violence;
he couldn't have me, but you can?
One stung my lip, another my left ear.
I shrugged it off, the low hum of agitation, totem and regret.
It made me wet, just thinking of what we would never do.
Hand-rolled pottery coiled like diamondbacks under shadows;
in a moment of sexual recognition, I am made whole
by your desire and the fear of mine.
This is what separates us.
Bees like small engines of absolute rage
pursued us down the hill back to the cave.
We were rich by then with sacks of gold
the virtuous are promised.
Don't you see, it was never a matter of saving me?
I was out of breath. It could not be helped;
desire's momentum shook us free from our senses.
You removed the stinger, obsequious tattoo,
splinter, subordinate indiscretion, my hand in your hand,
caution flower, raspberry welt, the glorious swelling.
We dry humped on the ground.
I held back and so did you.
In the hammock of woven vine, we slept as brother and sister,
desire stuck in a fissure of the self;
night came like an accomplice to promise, to abandonment;
the moon, cold as another country split your face in twos.
I made myself come just looking at you.

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Lise: Her Hands

A STORY BY REBECCA BAGGETT

The woman I loved told me she was going to shoot her dog, and I didn't say a word to dissuade her. I'd been in love with Lise for six months—*in love*, I say, as if I could give the situation more dignity than it possessed. I was infatuated, crazed, obsessed—I both sought and dreaded opportunities to use her name, because speaking it aloud felt like confession; I faltered in mid-sentence when I heard her voice in the crowd behind me at parties; and my fingers stuttered across the keyboard if I thought of her while I was working, so that I tried never to think of her, which was clearly impossible, spent large portions of my day staring blankly out of windows, head propped on my hand.

So when Lise said she *had* to shoot her dog, that the dog was clearly crazy, that she couldn't deal with her destructiveness any more and couldn't leave her chained outside all day, because what kind of life was that? when Lise said no one understood, that her lover, her coworkers, her friends all thought she was cruel, so she'd have to do it alone, and she dreaded it, I said of course she wouldn't, I'd help her, I'd go with her, I'd do anything. . . . We were in a downtown cafe, exchanging poems. We met there twice a week, ate lunch, critiqued each other's work. My poems lay beside Lise's plate, with a smear of marinara sauce on the first page. Hers were in my shoulder bag, which hung from the back of my chair. I was sipping a lukewarm cup of Earl Grey tea; Lise had Red Zinger and Mexican beer.

She leaned across the table, put her hand on mine. She had square fingers, close-cropped nails, callused palms. She had worked as a horse breaker in Arizona, on a shrimp boat off the North Carolina coast, and roofing houses in Texas and Louisiana. I dreamed about those hands, imagined they could do anything. I wanted them to do it all to me. I was twenty-three and had had exactly two love affairs. Lise was thirty-one and said that she'd had dozens. She and Celia had been together for four years.

I'd never know, Lise was saying, in her voice like whiskey, her husky, caressing voice that sounded like making love even when she was passing on a recipe, I'd never know how much better that made her feel. She didn't want to put it off too long, thought she'd do it Saturday, would call me then. I turned my hand in hers, clasped it for a moment before she took it away, and wondered what she thought of my smooth palm, my shaped and polished nails.

Lise finished her beer, unzipped her backpack, slid my poems inside. We left a big tip and parted on the corner, hugging each other good-bye. Her flannel shirt stroked my palms; wisps of her curly hair tickled my ear. I thought of turning my head, brushing my mouth against hers, so quickly that it might seem an accident, but she had already taken her hands away. I stood blinking as she strode to her truck and slung the back-

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pack onto the seat, then lifted her hand in farewell.

I woke early Saturday morning. Lise didn't call. We met on Monday, at the cafe, and she explained that she and Celia had spent the weekend quarreling, most of Saturday debating whether they should break up. She tapped an unlit cigarette against the table edge and sipped from a bottle of Heineken. I watched her hands and clenched mine in my lap, hoping there was nothing but concern in my face, my voice.

Lise raised the cigarette to her mouth and lit it, cupping her hands around the flame. She shook the match and dropped it on her saucer, inhaled, blew smoke toward the ceiling. Did I think—she began, then shook her head.

Making up, she said, had taken all of Sunday.

Friday at lunch I had a beer myself. Lise drank two and told me earnestly that we'd have to take the dog out to the country in the morning, that her mother would be coming up next weekend, so it had to be tomorrow. She would call me, early.

The brown bottles sweated against our hands. I watched her fingers, curled around her bottle's side. We ate two baskets of chips and salsa and talked about my poems. Lise told me she hadn't been writing.

I want to read this one aloud, she said, and read my own poem to me, leaning against the table. I didn't dare look at her, stared instead at my hands, knotted on the table, while that astonishing voice slid inside me, through my veins, leaving me open and aching. Lise stopped reading, then talked about the last lines. I nodded, scarcely knowing what she'd said, and her fingers brushed mine.

You mustn't just agree with criticism, she said. You have to have a sense of what you want to do with your work. Defend it. Fight for it.

I stared into her hazel eyes, counted flecks of green and gold.

I do know, I said. Exactly what I want.

Good, she said. That's good. And looked away.

Saturday I waited for her call until eleven-thirty, then gave up, went to the laundromat and grocery. I returned at two and from the porch heard my telephone ringing. I hurried into my bedroom, snatched up the receiver, and a woman's voice, a stranger's, impatient, demanded if her order was in *yet,* didn't we know she needed it right now, today? I said it wouldn't be in for a month, slammed down the receiver, then picked it up again and dialed Lise's number. Celia answered on the second ring. I listened as she said hello? hello? hello? her voice rising a little with each repetition, then set it down, quite gently, and turned away.

Lise called me just before midnight. I thought she would apologize, explain, but instead she told me that she and Celia had quarreled again; she'd needed to hear my voice; I was the only person in the world whose voice she could bear to hear. Her words slurred slightly at the ends, a gentle sound, almost like the sea.

Should I come over? I asked, reaching for the jeans I'd tossed across my desk chair an hour before. Or would she like to come here? Or we could, if she preferred, meet somewhere?

Her breath came roughly across the wires, as if she were crying, or on the verge of tears. She couldn't, she said, couldn't see me now. She just wanted to hear my voice. She'd sleep now, and call me in the morning.

Of course she never called. Despising myself, I scarcely left the house, dialed her number four times, hung up before the ring. Monday we met at the café. She drank black coffee, iced, and spoke in monosyllables. She gave me two new poems, said she hadn't had time to read mine properly, and could we skip this Friday's meeting? She wouldn't have time, she said, with her mother coming.

She hooked an arm across the back of her chair, lit a cigarette, and stared at me across it, as if daring me to mind. I forced my voice to coolness, told her Friday was no problem, I was busy, too. A lie, of course, and I was sure she knew it.

She drew on her cigarette, exhaled, and said that she'd been thinking we might want to scale down to one meeting a week. Two seemed a bit much. Didn't I agree?

I said of course, if that was what she wanted, then stopped and drew a deep breath and said no, I didn't agree at all, that I would miss the second meeting, that it helped my work, I'd like to think it helped hers, that once a week was not enough for me. My voice trembled, and I could not read her eyes, though she didn't look away. Besides, I added, this wasn't only business—there was friendship. I'd thought that we were friends. I stopped myself again, before I could cry, and stared at my fingers, curved round the thick white mug of China tea.

She jabbed out her cigarette with quick, sharp movements and put her hand over mine. We were friends, she said. She didn't mean it. She was tired and worried about Celia and her mother. They didn't get along, and the dog had been wild again, all week. Next weekend, she said, she'd definitely call me. And we could meet for lunch on Monday, when her mother had gone.

The next Monday we talked first about our poems, and Lise said that one of mine had gone through her head all weekend, that she'd heard my voice whenever she closed her eyes. I'd wanted to like her new work, hadn't, and had spent two hours Sunday deciding

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exactly why. She listened while she sipped her second beer and said that she agreed, had known even while typing out the poems that they were weak, but hadn't wanted to acknowledge it. She said her whole weekend had been maddening, that the only thing that kept her sane had been the thought of lunch today, that she hadn't realized how much she needed this time together, needed me. She hoped she hadn't been too harsh last week. It was only that she felt safe with me, she said, could trust me to forgive her darker side.

I shook my head, murmured something, and abandoned my tea, knowing I couldn't swallow if I tried. Outside, Lise put her arms around me, held me tight. I felt her heart beating against mine.

Friday, she said, and let me go. Till Friday.

Friday she was late. I stalled the waiter, drank wine I didn't want, and bitter coffee, knowing I'd have to go from lunch to work. I was ordering when she came to our table, her backpack dangling from one shoulder, a cigarette already in her hand.

Dos Equis, she told the waiter, and taco salad. She hadn't thought she'd make it, she told me, drawing on her cigarette, staring across the room at someone I couldn't see. Work had been a madhouse. She hadn't rewritten the poems. Mine weren't bad, but she hadn't read them carefully. She ate half her taco salad, gulped her beer, and left before I'd finished, saying she had to get back to the site. I finished my meal carefully, forcing myself to chew, and before I left the table picked up her beer bottle and drained the last sip. The mouth of the bottle was cool.

The phone woke me, early the next morning. I fumbled for it, pressed the receiver to my ear.

Hey, said Lise. I woke you, didn't I? I mumbled something and stared at the clock face: 6:15.

I'm sorry, Lise said.

I said it didn't matter.

I'm going out this morning. With the dog. If you don't want to go, I'll understand. I've been awake all night, thinking about it. If I don't do it now, I never will.

I'll come, I told her and put down the phone.

She picked me up twenty minutes later. She had a thermos of coffee in the truck, which she handed to me as I closed the door. I put in cream and sugar, she said, just the way you like it. Unless you'd rather have a beer.

Oh, no, I said, my stomach churning at the thought. She nodded, raised the can she held to her mouth, and tipped back her head. I watched her brown throat move as she drank.

There was a shovel on the floorboard. The dog was in the back. She whined against the window until Lise pulled away from the curb, then stood with her head over the side, ears blowing. She was a larger dog than I'd remembered, with a pointed face, long ears like a spaniel's, and golden fur. Three years old, her former owner had said, and housebroken, but she chewed everything in sight, pissed all over the house, shat under the dining room table and in a dim hallway, whined night and day, and had at least two seizures a week. The vet said it wasn't anything he could repair; she might have been mistreated at some point, there might be brain damage. A healthy animal otherwise, and Lise should fence the yard, keep her outside.

We drove out of the city, into the country, where dirt roads branched off from the blacktop every mile or two and kudzu strangled trees. We drove and drove until I dozed off, then woke with a start to Lise's hand on my thigh. I blinked at her.

Celia and I split up last night, she said.

Again, I said, as lightly as I could. But come tomorrow. . . .

No, she said softly. This time's for good. She turned the truck abruptly into a field. I clutched at the door as we jounced across old plow furrows, then came to a stop beside a stand of trees, stranded like an island in the sea of red clay. This looks like a good place, she said, and opened her door.

I opened mine, more slowly, and stepped into knee-high scrub. Lise was leashing the dog, murmuring. Good dog. Good dog.

The dog whined and wriggled, licked at Lise's face, then pissed a stream across the tailgate. Jesus, Lise muttered and tugged her down, then turned to me. Can you hold her? I have to get the gun.

I took the leash. The dog's nose pushed against my palm. I smoothed the fur between her ears. *The dog,* Lise had called her, for so long that I had forgotten her name.

Good girl, I said. Good dog. The truck door slammed. Lise walked around, her left arm angled behind her.

Can you tie her over there? she asked me, gesturing to the trees. There's rope in back—hope it isn't wet.

Lise—

I stopped, picked up the rope, led the dog away, and tied her to the nearest tree. I watched my pale fingers fumble with the knots. They felt icy cold, though my face and neck were hot. The dog whined again and nudged her head against my thigh A little trickle of piss ran across the tree roots.

I looked back toward the truck. Lise set a beer can on the tailgate, cocked the rifle, then lowered it again.

Okay, she said. You need to come back here.

I looked at the dog, swallowed hard, and went to her.

Stay behind me, she said. I raised my cold hand, closed it on her shoulder, and said, Wait. Lise, wait.

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Jesus, she snapped and lowered the gun again, shrugging my hand away. What is it?

I'm sorry, I said. Lise, I'm sorry, but surely there's something else—some other way you could—

I've been *through* this, she said. Goddamnit. The Humane Society says they'd euthanize her—but maybe she'd spend a few days in a cage first, miserable. She hates being tied—I can't afford a fence. And who would take her? You want her? Sure—she's yours.

I shook my head, stared down at the grass.

All right, then, damn it. Get out of the way.

She stepped past me, walked toward the dog, who whined and wriggled her hindquarters, tugging at the rope. Lise stopped about a foot from her, her right arm holding the rifle against her side.

Good dog, she said. Good dog, and raised the gun. It cracked, and her shoulder jerked with the recoil. The dog slumped without a sound into the grass. Lise stumbled to the truck, laid the gun in back, then braced her hands on the side.

Oh, God, she said, as if she were truly praying, oh, God, and put her hands across her face. When her shoulders began to shake, I looked away, toward the clump of trees. The dog lay stretched as if asleep, her golden fur shining from the scrub and weeds.

Lise uncovered her face. I think I wanted you to stop me, she said, and stretched out a hand to me. I stared at it, feeling everything inside me halt, then turn to ice.

I'll get the shovel, I said, and turned away, glimpsing, from the corner of my eye, Lise's hand lowering again to grip the side of the truck, remembering how I'd dreamed those hands on me. □

E. R. ROMAINE

CHRISTOPHER SMART

Imprisoned in Bedlam for "poetical fancies" (1757)

1.
Kit Smart prays
on the sidewalks of London.
What God shrouds him? Who troubles to hear
his rhyme, his cat, his mad scribbles
scratched against the stones of Bedlam?
It's the same God, the one he scripts
when the going's rough.

He knows how to play possum.
Perhaps there is no God, just some gamemaster
who's got the outcome fixed. And if it is?
You have to be mad to scribble.
To want the harmony of a child.
To live far below words.

2.
Mad, he has become a convenience
for the eye of pity.
Visitors point and gape from a balcony
into a hole, feeling charitably normal,
thanking God the weather in their brains
hides no devils.

They leave. Kit listens.
A woman's fan snaps.
A man bangs his pipe on the railing.
Their steps and chatter —is it music
that hisses against stones?

Praise, Kit cries
praise the fancies that got me here

3.
Inside the tracks of memory
he sees his cat.
Inside the smell of words
he remembers
the cat's belly flat against the floor,
his haunches raised,
the mute grace of his leap.

Inside the foul and greasy air of Bedlam,
where God may be
or not,

he will write of Jeoffrey, his cat.
It is time
when the going's rough,
to invent faith.

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Being Straight

MARGARET MORGANROTH GULLETTE

WHEN I WAS IN MY junior and senior years in high school, my crowd met at Kennie's apartment.* In Kennie's most daring insubordination to date, he had moved out of his parents' dim brick single-family. Miraculously, he lived in an apartment all his own. It was a new apartment and I remember the large white living room as if there were nothing in it but Kennie's piano and a couch and a door. The room seemed transparent, like Kennie's clear freckled skin; it had bonhomie, like Kennie's round face; it smiled Kennie's frequent leisurely smile, which revealed small white harmless teeth.

No other place welcomed us. In all that time Rick's parents let him have the house once, for that New Year's Eve party where I got too drunk and threw up before I could get to the bathroom, onto my black elbow-length-gloved arms. Bastone had a room of his own next to the L that was squalid. In houses where parents watched TV in the living room there was no space for privacy. We went to cafes in the Village, we danced in gay bars on the lower East Side, but we congregated at Kennie's on Ocean Parkway. There was no place to meet at our vast high school, or perhaps our lunch times didn't all overlap—but that bureaucratese tells it all: how we could never have met publicly in a regimented space, as if we were a permitted activity. Legend had it that Mack had hung out of the fourth story window of the high school by one arm until a teacher threatened him with expulsion. That was all the building was good for, a place for stunts. My grade point average was my stunt. It was probably legendary too, but that never occurred to me. Everyone else had something crazy and great about them, it seemed to me, but until I joined I was just a shy brain.

After that, though, I was no longer an outsider, because we all knew we were in one way or another outsiders. Once somebody looked around and said, "The flip, the spic, the kikes, the dyke, the femme, the butch, the straights, anyone left out?" God, that was a gas. There aren't too many sentences so useful that you remember them textually thirty years later. After the shock of hearing "kike" for the first time, and waiting silently to learn what "flip" meant (it meant Macky), I recognized the accuracy and adequacy of that sentence. Yes, we had everything in common, even though some bigmouth world would spit us out in separate gobs. We were a great crowd, the best crowd. The only strange crowd.

It was the late Fifties in Brooklyn, and I was sixteen. We despised the herd, the untalented, the squares, the gum-chewers—the 3500 others in Midwood High who were infallibly going to turn into their parents, fate worse than death. We had our own language—noogie talk, which was a purse-lipped Percy-Dovetonsils accent, a set of sounds only we knew how to make. Everyone had a legend or two. Marsha was my pal from age eleven, tall where I was short, giggly where I was earnest, with a body so lean it was clear she'd be a model, even though with her talents she could be an artist too, or a singer. Marsha could make even me sound good, wrapping harmony around my wobbly alto. Rick acted, and he had friends who were real actors—one in *West Side Story*, who had a red convertible and a monkey. Rick had cabinet photos of himself posed to look like a model or an actor; he was readying himself for a career. Eileen was a writer and a comic. Mack had a full four-octave range (it was Macky who said to me—to *me*—"You have an amazing vibrato.") He also did judo, had a black belt and registered hands. Macky was gorgeous besides, the gift of mixing a Filipino father and a Jewish mother (we said), although his parents separately had nothing to boast of in the way of looks. Mack was whom I wanted to look like, when I didn't want to look like Marsha. I did look more like him, I thought—my upturned Russian eyes like his upturned Eurasian eyes, both of us with high cheekbones. I went to see him play, delicate bare feet on the mat, bowing to his opponent before matches that were full of his grace and his beautiful voice uttering sudden grunts of threat. I bought a judo ghi.

Kennie had been a legend for a long time. Every year he wrote and directed and conducted the big school musical, Sing. For us privately he played Chopin's Polonaise and Beethoven's Pathetique and Johnny Mathis's "Oh my Love" on the piano, sang in a clear Noel Coward voice. "Oh, my love, my darling/I've hungered for your touch. . . ." He had perfect pitch. That he was gay was another way he had of being more interesting than anyone else. At first, I didn't know that he was

*Most names have been changed.—MMG

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gay. In fact, when I first beheld him I didn't know the word. Sophomore year, a lonely arrival from an accelerated junior high program, I went out for Sing and conceived that I had a crush on him, which was a Midwood way of being one of the girls. Boy dumpling with doe eyes, sturdy and joky at the podium, twinkly cynosure, he was a male idol. But clean-cut—he had short bleached-blond hair, with a forelock instead of a pompadour. In no way a sexy greaser, a Neil Sedaka, a Frankie Avalon. He dressed like my brother. The girls in sling-backs wooed him, but so did the SAT crowd.

One day I wore my brother's zip-necked gray and black flannel overshirt to choral rehearsal of Sing. Kennie had exactly the same shirt; dizzily, I ran the risk that he'd wear it that day at Sing rehearsal and people would notice and make horrible writhing jokes. I wanted only him to notice. He didn't. Nobody else did, either, but I slunk home that afternoon ashamed, and quickly got my neck out of the collar, which had too short a zipper for ease, and pulled off the top, which was too bulky for comfort. I never wore it again. I slipped out of my crush with about the same facility. Through Kennie I learned early two extremely valuable lessons about love that most people never learn: "Dopes fall for people everyone else wants too" and "You can always fall out again." The second, especially, was to save me some grief much later, during the time when love became the serious business of life.

When Rick lighted on me to be his girl, spring of junior year, I found Kennie there at the center of the crowd. I had jumped up to the inner circle, just the way when women marry "advantageously" they get a lift in social class. I learned Kennie was gay because everyone else assumed I already knew it.

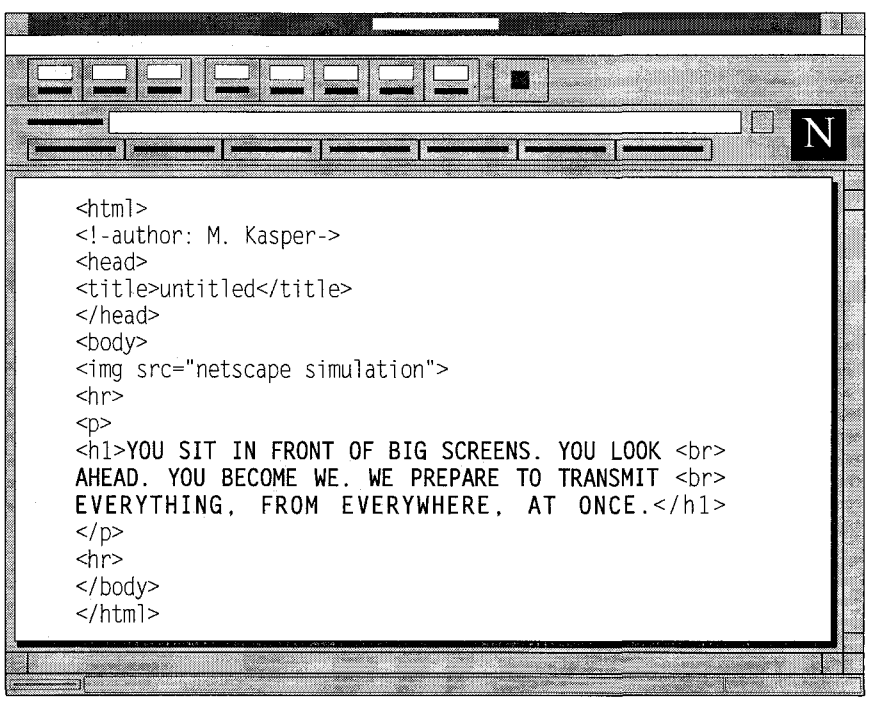
Kennie was compelling. A butch romantic, he played swaying from side to side on the bench, moody, intent, the little blond curl falling over his smooth forehead, swept away. When he was playing, the dark unhappy side of him that Rick told me all about could be glimpsed. He was hooked, Rick said, and Rick was his best friend and knew. But I didn't understand, even though I got more than just those glimpses at the piano during the year we all went everyplace together. One blank Sunday afternoon when the crowd hadn't arranged to meet, Rick called my house and said come quick, and whatever I said—I can't imagine what I could have said to my so-protective mother, to get her to let me go—but she even drove me over.

Kennie held a container of pills. Excited, stuttering, his speech slurred, he was threatening to swallow the rest. Rick had kept him talking until I arrived.

"You can't do this, you have a great future ahead of you," I pleaded. "Rick and I love you—we all love you. You make it happen, Kennie. Nobody could live without you." Every word was true for me. I was the one who took the vial he handed over and flushed the contents hastily down the toilet, in horror. That day I grew out of adolescent dependence into being the kind of person others depend on. Kennie rewarded me, with an ambivalence I didn't detect, by calling me Auntie Margie.

That Sunday made Kennie more precious, but not different. We all harbored deadly self-hatred, it seemed to me. We were unhappy, our parents didn't understand us, we had no one but one another. In the bathroom one day I took my father's razor and promised myself I'd slice my hand—not my wrist, just the fleshy thumbball. Not deep—just a touch. Not to hurt—just to know. I couldn't do it. When I pushed the blade at all, my skin became unexpectedly thick, springy, resistant, producing only the tiniest hair of blood. I was no less genuinely unhappy, I thought, but I was a coward. In a high-school English paper I supported suicide as a right, and my teacher came over to me when he handed the paper back and said in a low voice but very distinctly, "I hope this has no personal application." Rick was more worried about Kennie. I dismissed that. "So Kennie is morbid, I am too. So are you." If I couldn't do it, no one in our crowd could do it. How could they; as the song said, "we had each other."

We knew lots of gays then, in and out of our crowd, but it was because of Kennie, I suspect, that some of us knew ourselves as straight. He of course, man beyond categories, said he was bi, AC-DC. Then there were the rest of us, gay or straight. It was really only out of courtesy that I was lumped with the straights. I'd necked with boys since



M. KASPER

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A TALKING MAGAZINE

I was thirteen, which was daring enough, but I hadn't had sex. I never had to admit I was a virgin. Nobody put me on the spot just because of it. Mack was believed to be getting some constantly; Kennie said he cruised; Rick never told, but he wanted to have sex with me and I wasn't doing it. I didn't know what any kind of sex was. It never occurred to me to wonder what Eileen and Hope did together, or Kennie and the boys he picked up, for the same reason it didn't occur to me to wonder what Rick and I—or anyone and I—would do if I were ever to decide to have sex. Sex seemed remote and mysterious. In the future, it was a wall with no doors. Nothing was ever done in our crowd that might have even sketched a door. Mack never brought any of his girls to the pad, Kennie never brought a boy or girl. Despite all the gossipping that went on, nobody said an enlightening word or told a dirty joke. Nobody mocked women. Kennie never insulted any of the girls just because they liked him. (Much later, when I heard "fag hag" for the first time I was shocked and dismayed, until I thought, "Kennie never used that word. Kennie never hated me." Recognizing contempt for what it was protected me.) Kennie sometimes spoke disparagingly about "rough trade"—and I knew there was something sad about the older boys who hung out at the meat rack on the dark west side of Washington Square Park, but I had nothing to imagine that with, no emotional or moral ideas to link it to, nor any sense that the big world that called us names might want me to attach certain feelings or ideas to those words. I had never heard a homophobic word. On all these subjects, what my crowd said was all I knew. What Kennie said, especially, was our education.

We were in somebody's father's car one day, three of us packed in the front seat and four in the back, and maybe it was Marsha who said something about small breasts, because even though we both would have loved to be models we weren't so happy to have small breasts; and Marsha could get away with saying stuff like that, with her giggle. Kennie said, unsmiling—just giving a judicious opinion—"More than a handful is too much." Somebody countered, "Prit-ty ex*plici*t!" which was noogie for breaching a taboo. But what Kennie said wasn't about sex. It undermined the whole pulchritudinous ideal maintained by male heterosexuality in the Fifties, the only ideal I knew or could imagine as ideal, the Woman I'd never grow up to be. And in college, flailing around in that meat rack, I heard, in Kennie's voice, as if he had said it textually, "Lovers say, in rapture, 'Enough!' You're all I need. Don't bother wasting your love on anyone who says different."

Being gay didn't seem to be mainly about sex. It was about being gay, which was more interesting in every way than being straight. If you were gay, you knew about everybody else who was gay: Bernstein, and Brando, and the author of *Giovanni's Room,* and Gide; everybody read *Corydon,* though I couldn't see what earthworms had to do with anything real. Not everybody knew about Baldwin and Brando and all the others—my cousins didn't, for example. Our crowd went to a gay bar on 28th Street to dance to records, admire the beautiful women, and drink vodka tonic. At the Grapevine nobody asked your age or thought it strange for Rick and me and Hope and Eileen to go out on the floor and come back to the same table. A former wallflower, I learned how to dance—show dancing, rock and roll, the chacha, the sensuous Fish, the dances that would later drive the heterosexual boys wild. On Second Avenue we met guys we knew who wore make-up, sometimes earrings. A black dancer named Albert who wore eye shadow brighter than mine made eyes at Rick; Rick joked, "He's the only person who ever walks between us," because everybody was supposed to know we were a couple and couldn't ever be apart. Albert was swishy, we agreed—an uncool thing to be. Being gay had its own language. I

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had never heard it before, but slang and double-entendres, reading the signs and outing the great became parts of speech.

Being gay, you had a history, love stories. Kennie told us how he'd been brought out when he was thirteen by an older boy, and it was clear that that had been a big event, and a totally good thing. It never occurred to me that Macky never told us about his first sexual experience; nor did Eileen. Not that Kennie told us anything about the experience itself. But he lectured in a serious voice about how important it was to be brought out young, and how unhappy he'd been before that. It was very simple: you just knew who you were and acted on it. There weren't two ways about it. Everybody was in the closet because they had to be—except of course that in our crowd everybody could be out. On Ocean Parkway the first time, in my literal-minded way I actually looked around for a closet. There was one in the living room, where Kennie kept a mop and a pair of rubber boots. A month later I couldn't believe I'd been such a moron. In those days I shed a babyish former self with disgust every couple of weeks.

There was more romance too. Hope went gay for Eileen. Hope was red-haired and already a little matronly. She had been in love with Kennie too, very very seriously and passionately, so that when Kennie didn't love her back (I don't know how we knew all this), it was a disaster. Then she fell in love with Eileen. Eileen I had known since the fourth grade, when she came into my life in the lunchroom because she said something was "excruciatingly funny." I had to ask my mother what excruciating meant. Eileen had two dark long braids to her waist then, like my dirty-blond ones but longer and tighter at the scalp. She turned up again in high school with her hair cut like my brother's, and she didn't shave her legs, and she wore straight tight skirts like the tough girls did (I wore dirndls and circle skirts) but hers didn't look the same, and she had Faith by her

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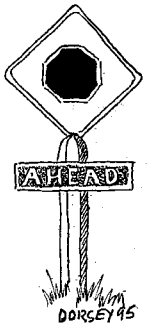
side. Eileen did imitations of Steve Allen that made her fourth-grade phrase meaningful. Eileen could almost make me pee in my pants.

I wasn't into innocence, in case some of this has given the wrong idea. On the contrary. I was there to collect knowledge—as much as I could hold, as much as I could bear. Kennie lectured about drugs. "Don't turn on, don't get hooked," he said gravely. I never did, I did the Sixties on three tokes. Rick listened to him too. That winter, one evening when we were all supposed to be at a get-together at Marsha's that my parents believed would end in a slumber party, Rick and I holed up in someone's room on Avenue J and Rick went cold turkey with my company. I kept him walking around the room and got him coffee and hugged him when he started to shiver and kept on telling him in my wise-woman voice all the reasons it was right to put himself through this hell. As long as I knew him, Rick stayed clean. Kennie was never noticeably high. He never played it up, being up, like some guys did; he only played it down.



Innocence is just stupidity. Nobody good wants it at the time they have it, and people who think they would like it back in their middle years probably never wanted to know anything ever or be kind to anybody or be needed and loved for nothing else but being absolutely necessary.

It all ended after graduation. That summer Mack opened up his judo studio on the top floor of the empty, dreary Academy of Music, and by September the rest of us had scattered into our charted destinations. Soon after, mysteriously, Hope did marry Kennie. *She* would watch him now—that's what I thought. But when she had a baby, he walked out—he wasn't ready to be a father, maybe he wasn't bi, it had been a mistake. I saw Kennie once more. I was visiting home, and took a train to Manhattan, an hour away, and then another out to Queens, and then two buses, and at the end of the line Kennie was sitting in a vast dusty garden in pyjamas and a robe. His round apple cheeks were beige, doughy. His eyes looked flat, cautious. Looking down, I saw he was wearing neat little crimson morocco slippers.

It was a mental hospital, and they were giving him electric shock "therapy." He had had a lot of sessions already, and he hated them. He didn't say so but I could see he was terrified and drifting away from his terror, which was himself, into someplace I couldn't follow. I said what we always said to him and I still meant it, but I knew it was no use. I didn't know why he was there and I couldn't do anything to get him out. We were childishly helpless. Somehow we had fallen backwards in life, gone the wrong direction, back before the daring freedom of Ocean Avenue, back before the safety and knowledge and gaiety of the crowd. It scared me, and for a long time after I couldn't remember Kennie except in that Queens garden.

Hope continued to live a few blocks away from my parents' on Avenue H. Later yet, she remarried, and then became a lesbian again. (It was a sign of how male our crowd had been that we hadn't even used the word lesbian; everyone was gay, it was supposed to be an honorific.) Anyway, I was told Hope's story much later, and had to be told, because when I went away to college in September, the very first week walking to the French exam on Oxford Street with my square new roommate from Philadelphia I tried to do noogie talk and couldn't manage to get out a single word, and cool as I was, I began to cry. We never gathered in Kennie's livingroom again and I broke up with Rick that Thanksgiving. In some irrevocable way that tear-filled walk in September was already the end, for me, of my crowd.

*

I HAD A FEW MORE years of being straight. Freshman year I made a new gay friend at Hayes-Bick in the Square: a tall blond graduate student in math, very pink and fair, with slightly buck teeth like mine and an inturned walk. The signs were really slight in those careful days, but I knew them instantly, and he knew almost as soon that I was okay. No one who looked safe could talk to me very long without hearing about the Grapevine or picking up a little language, because I stayed as long as I could under the influence of the world in which I had been necessary. Terry introduced me to his own crowd, which was made up of graduate students and ex-boyfriends, and was all-male (but I didn't notice that, again, until just now, writing this). He had an apartment in Somerville that I could walk to, and when I got lonely I often did, even without notice. When Marsha brought her beautiful bones up, jauntily, defying the Ivy League with comic blitheness, Terry served us lobster thermidor. His crowd never became my crowd. But in those first loveless years of becoming heterosexual, I found Terry the only man I knew whom I could rely on. Whenever I called him, he was ready to talk, I could drop by whenever I liked for a stiff bourbon, he didn't stop calling or disappear or cut me in the street, he never got bitchy or cruel, as the boys I went out with did. Unlike them, he was stable, competent, and helpful. Sophomore year I was given a section leader I despised in English Lit, and Terry recommended another he said was brilliant (and of course gay) and I was able to transfer and my way was made. I wasn't in love with Terry or Steve, and instead of learning from them about life, I suspect I brought to them in Boston the much freer gay air I carried from Manhattan. I had a few more years of male friendship that was quite uncomplicated, with nothing but indifference or unrequited passion to rival it. □

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■

GRAY JACOBIK

THE BED OF MUSIC

We lie touching on the bed of music, lost
together, although you are in the Midwest
and I am in the Northeast, and two phalanxes

of weather stage maneuvers between us.
You breathe and I feel your breath moving
in me, my lungs fill when yours empty,

and so the violin concerto enters our speech
then enlarges our hearts to make room for
everyone Harmony wants us to remember

and forgive; and now one by one they come
and stand before us: only your line is not
as long as mine, and since you are more

self-sacrificing, you take my longer line
and forgive first my father for his blundering
ignorance, then my mother for her prudery and

concern with seemly appearances. You touch
his weary face and her ashen face after sensing
the grief and anguish that has kept house in

their bodies. You turn pale and tremble
from shouldering their pain. I turn to your
father who is still asleep having just entered

the world that bends and extends time; he is
forgiven for his routine absences and all he
never knew about your mother's tribulations;

his hand is still bloodied from a cardinal's
beak, he nods and smiles in his deep slumber.
Then our former spouses seek forgiveness,

and others we suffered to love us; one or two
who sated themselves without thinking. We
absolve them for staking the gamblers and

rogues of dispassion, the shysters of gossip.
It takes us all day and half the night. We are
spent as the hunter's cartridges—the music has

blessed us beyond our strength to forgive.
We are blank—and thin as the haze of stars.

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■

On Writing a Story Already Written

DALLAS WIEBE

MY FRIENDS AND I used to play a game called "What Happened After." In this game we tried to see who could come up with the most plausible notion as to what happened to literary characters after the story was over. We extrapolated from the narrative and came up with "Huck Finn became the sheriff of Dodge City," "Augie March committed suicide last year at Marienbad," "Jake Barnes became Secretary of Defense," "Tom Joad retired last year from the Oakland, California, police force," "Dorothy and the Cowardly Lion got married when she turned sixteen." Many years after we no longer played the "what happened" game, I saw an ad for a magazine called What Happened to Lady Chatterley's Lover? It seemed to be doing the same thing that our game did. We weren't the only ones to have the idea.

One of the obvious speculations was what happened to Hemingway's suitcase, the one stolen from Hadley in 1922 at the Gare de Lyon as she was preparing to leave for Lausanne to meet Ernest. Or, an even finer speculation, what was in that suitcase? The suitcase presumably contained virtually all the fiction that Hemingway had written up to that time. The suitcase included original typescripts and carbon copies of stories and part of a novel. When he learned that the suitcase had been stolen, Heming-way returned to Paris immediately, but could not find anything. No one knows what happened to the suitcase and its contents.

Twenty-five years ago I thought that the theft and the contents of Hemingway's suitcase would make a good story. I didn't write the story but I did write down the idea. Two years ago I was looking through my pile of notes for stories and I ran across that note. When I found the note I thought that I should write the story. It seemed to me like an original and clever idea for a story. The idea was not original and it was not clever. I discovered after I wrote my story that the story had already been written.

My story is called "Hemingway's Valise." It was to be a part of a series of spoofs of detective fiction. It would have been the second story in the series. My series of spoofs are told by Gottlieb Liebgott, who relates the exploits of my detective Dallasandro Vibini, who specializes in solving petty crimes. In my story Liebgott and Vibini take a vacation in Paris. They no sooner arrive than they are contacted by two characters named Max and Al. Max and Al offer them a suitcase full of manuscripts and carbons. They say it's Hemingway's suitcase. Liebgott and Vibini examine the manuscripts. They decide to acquire the suitcase and its contents for $100,000 to take back to the U.S., not really caring if the manuscripts are authentic or not because they believe they can sell them, real or not, to an American university for at least $500,000.

I KEPT THE STORY for several months before finally deciding to send it out to see if it was publishable. A week after I sent it out I learned in a casual conversation about a book called *Hemingway's Suitcase* by MacDonald Harris. While talking to my colleague Jeff Hillard, I mentioned my story and what it was about. Quite by chance one of Jeff's students at the College of Mt. St. Joseph in Cincinnati had purchased the Harris novel at a used book sale and passed it on to his teacher. I immediately borrowed the book and read it. I had never read anything by MacDonald Harris and had never heard of his novel. When I finished reading the book, I wrote the magazine where I had sent my story and said to send it back immediately. My story looked as if it were plagiarized from Harris's novel. Not only were some of the ideas the same, but even some of the lines were similar. I recommend MacDonald Harris's *Hemingway's Suitcase* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990). It's a first-rate piece of work. The five parodies of Hemingway stories are perfect.

No sooner had my contretemps with the Harris novel occurred than I saw a brief review of Gerhard Kîpf's *Papa's Suitcase* (New York: George Braziller, 1994. Translated by A. Leslie Wilson). I ordered a copy and read it. It too is an excellent book. In the book someone goes on a search for the lost suitcase. In Harris's novel a character tries to recreate —read "forge"—the contents of the suitcase; in Kîpf's novel the bibliophile who goes on the search finds out, or thinks he finds out, what happened to the suitcase and its contents.

I began to suspect that my idea for a story had occurred to a lot of writers. It appears in William McCranor Henderson's *I Killed*

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Hemingway (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993). Although the suitcase episode is not the central point of the novel, it does play a part. In the novel, Eric "Pappy" Markham claims that he taught Hemingway how to write. Pappy claims that he stole the suitcase from Hadley when he took her to the train in 1922 (pp. 93-94). He also claims that he threw the manuscripts into a sewer because they were all juvenilia and worthless. He even claims that he got Hadley to put the carbons in the suitcase so that nothing would be saved. He claims further that he went to Ketchum, Idaho, and killed Hemingway and that he saved a fragment from the suitcase, a story in which Nick Adams kills his own father.

My interest in Hemingway as a fictional figure led me to Bill Granger's *Hemingway's Notebook* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1986). In this complicated spy novel, the "November Man," using the name Devereaux, meets Harry Francis in some place called St. Michel. Harry possesses a notebook which Ernest Hemingway kept and which contains, in code, information that Hemingway presumably knew about how the CIA double-crossed its own government in order to get Castro. A number of agencies want the notebook. Hemingway doesn't appear in the novel, but his notebook is what the plot centers on. Hemingway seems to have been involved in politics in some obscure way. It opens up speculations and leads to fiction. As Elliot McGuire, the point of view character in *I Killed Hemingway*, says, it's hard to tell where biography ends and fiction begins. He also says, "...so many careerists feeding off the bloated life of one man" (p. 28).

The four novels I've cited here are, of course, much more complicated than I have indicated. All four are worth reading and are part of the Hemingway presence. And that's what it's all about, isn't it? We can't seem to let go of the character Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway has become the source of fiction. We seem to be getting a whole new generation of fiction based on what Hemingway's life portends. Whatever the reasons might be, Hemingway so permeates our fiction, our literary history and our minds that we don't want to lose him. We hang on to him by making him into a fictional presence. His presence has passed the stage of being an author; he has been made into a "fiction."

Now I wonder how many other writers have had the same idea I had when I wrote my "Hemingway's Valise." I'd be happy to hear of other treatments of the lost suitcase. I'm sure there must be others. The story idea is, if you think about it, obvious. So much for originality. □

STEPHEN DOBYNS

PRIMAVERA

He loves his wife and to her he gives this present:
a returnable bottle, dangling from a stick.
He is our brother, tricked by delusion and deceit.

Perched at the top of a dumpster, he has spent
ten minutes fishing for a bottle worth five cents—
he loves his wife and to her he gives this present.

It's a balmy spring morning on West 14th Street
and the woman holds up her bag of black plastic—
she is our sister, tricked by sham and deceit.

As her husband maneuvers the stick with the string,
her eyebrows rise and fall, reflecting her excitement.
She loves the husband who offers her this present.

They are Mexican or Guatemalan, chubby and short,
dark skin, black hair, perfect Latino stereotypes,
who traveled north because they believed the deceit

of the ads, the TV shows, the promised junk
that seems to make life complete. He wanted,
because he loves his wife, to give her this present:

an elegant life in New York, but he can't find work.
The emerald green bottle dangles from the stick.
The man loves his wife and to her he gives this present.
Our brother, our sister: victims of deceit.

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Good Stories, Well-Written, 4 Sale, Cheap

PERRY GLASSER

AT LUNCH WITH my buddy who works at the big mall bookstore, I asked, "Who'd buy a collection of short fiction entitled Good Stories, Well-Written?" He's a Gen X kind of guy; we're not talking pierced body parts but, then again, he's never had a job without a plastic name tag. He wears a white shirt, a badly knotted tie. Six days a week he eats at the food court.

I don't care where you live, you know his bookstore. There's a rule: no one may open a mall anywhere in these United States without a Spencer's Gifts or one of these bookstores. The 'zine stand at the entrance sucks people into the place—lots of muscle and diet magazines—and the book racks overflow with bestsellers by name-brand authors, sort of Procter and Gamble but with characters and plot where you'd expect soap or toothpaste. The paperbacks have covers printed with metallic inks, and a lot of books have a swastika on the cover. My buddy is no skinhead, but he tells me anything with a swastika sells more than anything without a swastika. He also tells me hardcover books have a shorter shelf life than Coors at the Quik-Mart, so there is just no way a big corporate buyer will stock a title that lacks a marketing edge. Book people don't read. To market a book, they want only a concept that excites them in fewer than twenty-five words. My buddy asked me, "How could we sell good stories that are merely well-written?"

It's not like the bookstore has no short stories at all. For maybe a high school kid with a retro teacher who insists, way in the back just behind the section called "Classics" are these anthologies with the words *west*, *south*, *lesbian*, *woman*, *under thirty* or *gay* in the titles. My buddy shook the powdered sugar from his doughnut and explained to me the thinking: no customer will read stories by someone who is different.

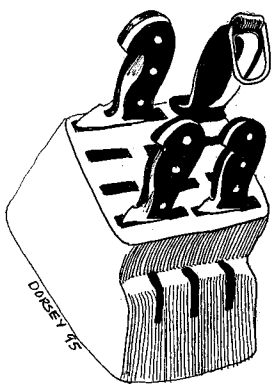
"Different from what?" I asked.

"Different from the customer," my buddy sighed. "People need to be reassured. God forbid they find out someone lives different from them and is nevertheless happy."

He waited for his frozen slush to melt enough to slide up through his straw. "It might make them insecure."

I confessed I had always thought of reading as a way of finding out about people who lived in different times and different places and thought different things, but no, my friend patiently explained, reading today was much more like looking into a mirror.

I think my friend eats too much food wrapped in waxed paper carried on plastic trays. His complexion is not terrific. I grew suspicious of his logic. I said there had to be people who read good stories just because they were well-written and did not care about geographic accidents or what the writer did with special friends in the dark, but my buddy shrugged and dipped a fry into the blot of ketchup he'd squeezed from a metallic envelope onto the tray paper. He allowed as how I might have a point, but it did not matter because no one could buy these books even if they existed, which he assured me they most definitely did not, because if they did, wouldn't he know about them, working in a bookstore and all?



So I visited my learned friend the professor of English over at State U, figuring he might know where to find good stories that were well-written. He sucked on a pipe and chuckled at my naïveté, and after nearly an hour he had me spinning. He explained that the idea of a 'good story' was merely a construct in my head, and if it could be in my head, it could be in anybody's head. Since the contents of everybody's head varied because of accidents of Fate, but never because of accidents of genetics (a totally heinous notion), and because even the contents of the same head varied from time to time, the whole idea of a "good story" was old-fashioned, needing to be deconstructed. Libraries overflowed with books that had been proven less good than had been previously believed, replaced by voices once marginalized. Literary quality varied like the stock market. This year, Henry Miller is off 10%, but there's a hedge because of the Anaïs Nin connection. There is a mutual fund—Bellow, Malamud, Roth— down 90% this decade, damn near bankrupt, and there is another fund —Cisneros, Chavez, and Alvarez— you buy in early, it could make a person very, very, very rich. A critic's job, the professor explained, contentedly leaning back and exhaling a great cloud of blue smoke, was

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like a stock broker's—find undervalued writers and share research in a way that sent a "buy signal."

When I asked him how he did that, he supplied me with the tearsheet of an article he had just published in a journal read only by learned professors at other State U's. Anyone who read this article, if they understood all the terribly long words, would buy whatever marginal voice he was selling. The professor was a heck of a critic and had discovered a neglected voice of the American post war period: Bazooka Joe & the Gang. You remember: the comic printed on wax bubble gum wrappers.

Post War Bubblegum Texts: Sexist, Racist Factoids in 3 Color Print, Angst in a Sweet Age—the Professor was offering such a course that very semester. He had petitioned the Dean for the recognition of a major. His secret ambition was to make BG LIT a separate department, freeing him from the English Department fogies that plagued him. He'd be named Chair, of course. There was a journal to plan, grants to be written, textbooks to be edited, an endowment to establish. And why not? Bazooka Joe was a marginalized voice. Bazooka Joe had to be marginal— who listened to him?

Well, that reminded me of my Gen-X friend at the bookstore, and when I told the professor the kinds of books I had seen there he nodded and scratched himself near the leather patch at the elbow of his tweed jacket. Since nobody believed there was such a thing as a good story well-written, all you could do was clump together any number of writers and their stories based on irrefutable, idiosyncratic facts.

"Facts?" I asked.

And seeing how I might be so slow as to be a two-pipe student, the professor scowled, reached for his latakia tobacco, and explained that since accidents of geography, gender, and sexual preference were irrefutable, they were the only means by which Art could be organized. Without that, what would we have? "Literature?" he asked, and laughed out loud as his thumb pressed fresh weed into the bowl of his Meerschaum.

So I asked who was in charge of deciding just how to slice and dice those irrefutable facts, just how it was I could find no anthologies by plump Switzers or blue-eyed South Americans. Was a good story by a gay twenty-five year old from the New West better or worse than a good story by any old standard? Were we in some way doing a nasty turn to the twenty-five year old gay writer who found the road to fame and fortune closely delineated by his sexual preference and age? Might he ever grow to be anything other than a gay twenty-five year old from the New West? Could he look forward to being washed up at thirty? Suppose he moved to Baltimore?

I am sure I'd have received an answer, but at that very moment the Professor glanced at his gold pocket watch, mumbled something about being late for an appointment he just recalled, and faster than the White Rabbit down the Rabbit Hole, off he fled to an important lecture comparing social commentary in Bazooka Joe to Madonna, Marilyn Monroe, and Mickey Mouse.

WELL, I GOT LUCKY. That very day I found on my doorstep like Little Orphan Annie wrapped in shabby blankets a whole boxload of short story collections. And so I saw that beneath the sun the race goes not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, but that well-written good stories were distributed by hopeful editors and writers who prayed for notice, and I saw that here was my chance to read a few, and I am fortunate enough to be able to tell you how you can find them for yourself. Behind the prose you will sense —but rarely see—a writer struggling to get it right. Since your big mall book store likely does not inventory them, you will be obliged to order these books special, but that is worth the trouble, for in addition to being entertained, you may come away from these stories with new insight. Though this is not the same as having yourself validated, having your self-loathing dispelled, or having your sense of isolation transformed to solidarity with a larger, hidden, once-silent community, it is nevertheless worth your effort.

Oddest of all, these stories achieve high art by seeking the universal in the particular, which is to say that the writers truly believe on some level that there indeed is a common, universal human experience. Good stories, well-written. High Art.

ALL THAT SAID, you may find it strange to have here recommended Evelyn Lau's *Fresh Girls and Other Stories* (Hyperion), because if ever there was a volume sent forth into the world with a marketing edge, it is this one. The photo of Ms. Lau's young, pretty, severe face on the dust jacket looms out of perfect darkness, dramatic and striking. The jacket art has a certain anatomical pinkness and, let's get past this point right away, all the stories are about young women involved in hopelessly destructive relationships, frequently sado-masochistic, a few employing equipment you thought only Members of the British

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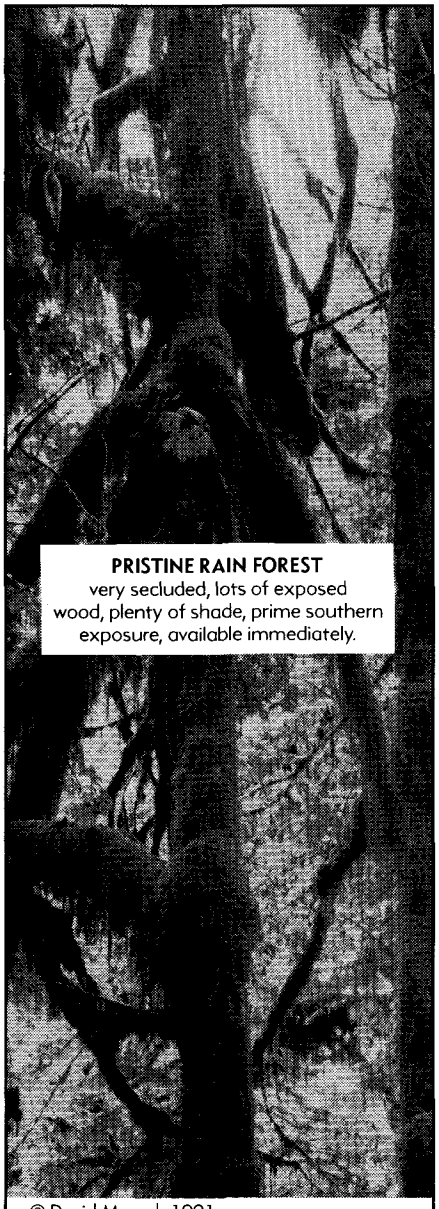
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Parliament knew the uses of. Several of the protagonists work in massage parlors or turn tricks, and the jacket copy with no elaboration informs us that Ms. Lau is a Canadian who by the time she was seventeen had survived two years alone on the streets of Vancouver.

But opening this nifty marketing dream we are delighted to discover the limpid prose of a talented writer. Here is a book not meant to be read exclusively by other teenage runaways in Vancouver, nor to be read by heavily breathing middle-aged men in trenchcoats in search of cheap thrills, nor even designed to be read by upwardly mobile professional women in need of catharsis. To the contrary, there's a world and mind-set here so uncompromisingly rendered that the only audience the writer can have in mind are readers who find pleasure in prose that delivers stark, unadorned, albeit painful, Truth. The stories never descend even close to tawdry. The prose is deliberately flat—anything else would bring us to the brink of pornography. You won't find a gratuitous adjective in the 109 pages. The pun is unavoidable—these stories achieve Art via restraint.

Ms. Lau's subject is power; sex is merely the occasion, flesh the medium. In Ms. Lau's stories, sex has little to do with love, devotion, sacrifice or pleasure. A woman gazes at her lover on the floor and thinks, "The power floods into me warm and soft and golden, dusty as pollen. I had not realized previously the extent of my emptiness that no kisses could fill, no flowers or brave words of love. The emptiness sang hollow and blue and then turned red as rage." Look at the prose. This is the eroticism of the poet, not of the smut peddler.

The characters in *Fresh Girls* are trapped either by circumstance or by compulsion. Since none of them is able to imagine a future, most of the stories are written in present tense. Thus, style and subject conjoin to make Art, and for the reader the landscape perceived by junkie hookers is bleak and lyric, stark and unforgiving. Any sense of voyeurism or thrill we may feel at witnessing people repeat the same acts again and again without fulfillment is, as we read, overwhelmingly replaced by sadness and pity. These people cannot stop doing what they do, though they know they should, and while most of us may never don black leather to fulfill our needs, all of us know what it is to be enclosed by our incapacity to imagine alternatives. A fetish of the flesh is no different from a fetish of the intellect. The only differences between a deviate and an ideologue are the instruments of compulsion.

The sadness of these lives is paramount. In "Marriage" a nineteen year old mistress thinks, "The people we pass in the park see a middle-aged man in a suit with his arm around a nineteen-year-old girl. . . . Their stares make me feel unclean, as if there is something illicit about me."

She is too young, and at the same time she is too old. It makes a reader squirm to read, "We cultivate fantasies for each other of what a doting, loving father he would have made me; of what a pretty accomplished daughter I would have made him. . . . And then, 'I wish you were my daughter,' as he kisses my neck, my shoulders, my breasts."

Lau's is a pitiable, sad world, but no peep-show. The reader in search of the word *throb* will be disappointed; the reader in search of a new, slightly askew insight to the human heart will find it. By examining these very particular people who populate stories entitled "Fetish Night," or "The Session," Evelyn Lau has deliberately and with great skill peeled back a layer of illusion to expose a bit of what is universal, raw, and true. These are good stories, well-written. Give the book a shot.

WAY AT THE OTHER end of the spectrum you'll find Tom Perrotta's *Bad Haircut: Stories of the Seventies* (Berkeley). This ain't no party, this ain't no disco, this is just Darwin, a small suburban town in New Jersey, the place where Americanized second generation white ethnics moved to raise their kids, a place where their kids are now physically nur-

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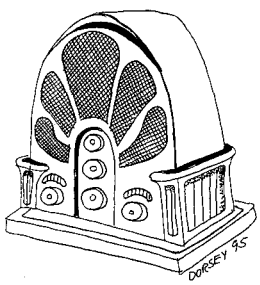
tured and spiritually starved. Tom Perrotta has given us a novel in mosaic, a book with no central narrative, an episodic *bildungsroman* for a guy named Buddy. By their simplicity, these stories resist pretensions to being the voice of the age, the guidebook to coming doom, or the definitive reading of just where the century went wrong. Rather, Perrotta's Darwin is just a place where young people evolve, and, dare I say it? the place where the dominant culture resides. In Darwin, sex drugs and rock and roll pervade life, albeit that life frequently originates in the back seat of the family car.



Tom Perrotta struggles to find the right words to keep the record accurate, and we are fortunate to have so fine an eye accompany an artistic will with that determination. The art here is less in the language than in the exquisite accumulation of details.

If you are a reader whose sensibilities are formed by television or mediocre film, you may be under the mistaken belief that details are simply the stuff of setting. Every scene needs a backdrop. A piece of furniture here. A drape there. A tree. A street. A few houses. The characters have to be some place, right?

Tom Perrotta, however, rejects such simplicity. He knows that the right details repeated, massaged, and put forward with subtlety will take a story aloft. Suddenly, what was ordinary becomes a high vantage point from which we see the infinite aspects of character; what was plain becomes essential, Truth with a capital "T."

There are little details that startle and delight. In "Race Riot" a guy "was grinding a cigarette into the overflowing ashtray as though he held a grudge against it." The same guy sits at a table at McDonald's, "sharing fries and writing my name in salt on the tabletop."

These nuggets of sight are sharp; the reader is at once reminded and sees in a literary flash much more than is available in a photographic image. Our vision is made Pure, free of nostalgia, that halo fuzzing memory.

Adding Art beyond Perrotta's accrual of detail is the vision that encompasses an entire tale. In "You Start To Live," for example, the story in which the titled bad haircut occurs, Buddy is a teen-age boy taking driver's education at the regional high school, Harding. It's one of those times when the kid in College Prep can actually meet a girl from Beauty Culture and Distributive Education. Laura is a bit more socially advanced than Buddy, but they get along well enough to sit on a curbstone to share a joint. Laura talks about her boyfriend and offers to cut Buddy's hair, and later that week when he accepts the offer, she botches the job. You want to know what that is like? Watch the details accumulate.

> It was a pretty good party -- her parents were in Florida -- but I wasn't in a very sociable mood. It happened to be Valentine's Day, a stupid holiday, and a miserable one if you are alone and have a bad haircut. On Friday, the Harding *Herald* had put out a special issue in which people wrote messages proclaiming their love or secret admiration. I read the whole thing, but my name wasn't mentioned.
> I stood in a doorway near the keg and watched the girls dancing in the living room. Most of them looked thoughtful and repeated a few simple movements over and over, while others whirled across the floor, all flying hair and arms. For about the tenth time, someone came up behind me and yanked off my hat.

The writing has the unmistakable feel of life-as-it-is, that remarkable facility for fiction to engage us in a vision that is larger than what is Historically Accurate. It's all understatement, a little of this, a little of that, but such writing is always magical; this miserably lonely kid hiding his bad haircut under his hat at a Valentine's Day party is not just one kid—he's all of us. Those accrued details pile up. We start to think and feel as Buddy thinks and feels because we see the world with Buddy's eyes. We remember being Buddy, and it doesn't matter who we are today or were back then: we remember being Buddy. It works so well that when we read of how Laura finally approaches him and says, "I want you," we are satisfied, knowing such a turn of plot was inevitable. And when she tells him she has broken up with her boyfriend, we are engaged by that turn of plot. But there is more—there are events that surprise and puzzle us—just as they surprise and puzzle Buddy. People are, after all, people, liable to contradictions. Few things are what they seem—and as Buddy learns this for the first time, as he starts to live, to stockpile moments and encounters that will stay with him always, we are reminded of what we, too, have always known and cannot forget. For those of you who have forgotten how plot can take you by the throat and make you want to know what will happen next, pick up *Bad Haircut: Stories of the Seventies*.

One further note: it's especially gratifying to see a collection of short fiction picked up by a mass paperback house, and one can only hope Berkeley will continue to seek out books that deserve a wider readership than small presses can initially obtain. These are good stories, well-written. Give the book a shot, and if Berkeley make a dollar, maybe they'll take this chance again some other day.

SOME SHORT STORY writers disdain plot. Rather than reaching closure, their stories reach thematic exhaustion. The high art here is to write exactly enough to make the point and not a syllable more. The greater the compaction, the higher the achievement; what we thought was complex and mysterious becomes instantly clear and stunning.

This is not cutting edge, and I am not being clever by pointing it out, but I want to make sure the notion of "good stories" does not restrict itself to stories you saw serialized in film episodes Saturday afternoons down at the Bijou. That wearying "and then, and then" quality of fic-

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tion just leaves some writers exhausted or bored, and there are more than a few readers leery of plot because in the hands of a hack plot becomes pasty, predictable and dull. The notion of "good stories, well-written," allows for considerable latitude. Good enough for Chekhov, good enough for us.

Take Heather Ross Miller's *In the Funny Papers: Stories* (University of Missouri Press). If you think that good stories well-written require plodding sequences of events with all the grace of a television sitcom, then open this volume whose mysteries and vision are the enigmas of character and those frozen moments in which we see with startling clarity a whole life. It is temptingly simple for a reviewer to pigeonhole this short fiction collection as Southern Gothic and be done with it, but that would shortchange the collection considerably and leave too much unsaid. To be sure, a lush southern voice pervades these stories, and that voice has for many readers considerable charm.

Quite a lot has been written about the southern voice, and even more has been said, and a good portion of all that is true and the rest is interesting enough when it avoids being downright stupid. Without once indicating that this region of the United States is the only region to have known a hostile invasion force or to have lost a war (Vietnam not withstanding, though it seems American Literature has grown more southern since 1975), a reviewer could point out the habit of characters who repeat the obvious, the plodding nature of their voices, or the eccentricities of personality. These southernisms make a reviewer's job facile. For example, in "A.D." we meet Mrs. Redwine, all of whose kids had the initials A and D. After the death, *Anno domini*. In the year of the Lord.

To a more mythical or literary woman, these letters might have symbolized something: time or old age or fate or God. But Mrs. Redwine got all their names off television. Day after day, waiting for each of her three kids to ripen within her, she had sat looking at television, taking keen notice of the names of soap opera heroes, game contestants, and the stars of the Mystery Movie. Once she hit on Amber Day's name, she stuck to the two initials, A and D.

A REVIEWER COULD catalog southernisms; a reviewer might make a comparison and maintain that the casual reader of *In the Funny Papers* will from time to time feel as though he has dipped into Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find" before the man in the black hat has executed that disturbing, obnoxious family; this reviewer will refrain from doing the obvious. At least, refrain from it at length.

In Heather Ross Miller's work many stories are told by children who do not realize the full import of the data they report. This artistic tactic is native to no region, but requires a delicate hand and a perfect ear, both of which Ms. Miller abundantly possesses.

The dramatic tension created in that gap between what a narrator reports and what a reader understands adequately compensates for whatever pleasures of plot might be missing in these stories. As children will, rarely are these stories chronologically related. These narrative monologues whirl through flashbacks within flashbacks, details sharply remembered, moments from years gone by summoned up to clarify the action of the present. Time as a narrative consideration is annihilated: what remains is character and emotional pitch distilled pure.

"Constance" opens with

> This New Year's Day. no day for weddings or anniversaries, is cold and wild with a harsh clear rain clattering over the roof, wind and rain sharp enough to eat you to the bone. Constance Biles knows that well enough, already depressed, and she mocks herself further, pointing out she's really nothing in this family, a genuine nobody. She doesn't even have a Jewel in her name like her cousins.
>
> Constance, no middle name, no Jewel anywhere. Just plain Constance Biles.
>
> Her Aunt Jewel and Uncle Lonnie got married on New Year's Day fifty years ago . . .

and after pages of history delivered with attitude, we know an entire family. This is rare stuff, often tart, frequently funny, and always engaging. Kick the tires; take it for a turn around the block. See you in the funny papers. These are also good stories, well written.

IF YOU WANT to read serious contemporary literature, you have to take serious social chances. Maybe the problem is not enough of us are willing to plunk down a few bucks for a book no one at the office has heard of or cares about. Serious readers have a secret vice—the love of a sweetly crafted voice that is fresh and clear is something that these days can be an embarrassment. Serious readers stand at the side a bit bewildered when the talk turns to the latest movie—they haven't seen it. They risk being called *eccentric* if they order books that only a rugged handful are willing to read, and they have to be prepared to describe their pleasure in terms that will leave the professors ready to correct their naïveté, or at least embellish what ought to be easy to understand to a level that no one can understand—or wants to.

But take a chance now and then. Read a book no one else has heard of because no one can categorize it. A few writers have been marginalized because the larger culture will not hear them, but many more are marginal voices because they are trivial, undeserving of being heard. When the right to free expression somehow became the demand to be heeded, the quieter voices of artists were overwhelmed. The most neglected category of fiction these days consists of those writers who produce good stories that advance no cause, that seek no community, whose only goal is craft and art.

So do Art in America a favor. Don't write your congressional representative. Buy yourself a good book. □

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